



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

2 October 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

Deirdre Hargey MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Gerry Carroll MLA

Nicola Brogan MLA

Apologies: Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Eóin Tennyson MLA

In Attendance: Peter Hall Committee Clerk

Clairita Frazer Assistant Assembly Clerk

Sarah-Anne McKinley Assistant Assembly Clerk

Stephen Magee Clerical Supervisor

Heather Graham Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 1:12pm in public session.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

As the meeting commenced with four Members the Committee moved to take briefings, deferring items requiring the decision-making until quorum of five had arrived.

5. Draft Programme for Government – 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 1:14pm;

Tony Simpson - Deputy Secretary, Strategic Policy and Reform Directorate

Wendy Lecky - Director, Strategic Policy and Reform

Jeff McGuinness - Head of Budget Sustainability Division

The officials briefed the Committee on the draft Programme for Government.

Paul Frew joined the meeting at 1.15pm.

Deirdre Hargey joined the meeting at 1.17pm.

Steve Aiken joined the meeting at 1.25pm.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the draft Programme for Government and the wider Departmental responsibility and the Budget Sustainability Plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to include the Hansard of the session in the Committee's response to the Committee for the Executive Office on the draft Programme for Government.

The officials left the meeting at 1:44pm

6. Fiscal Framework Update – 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 1:45pm;

Tony Simpson - Deputy Secretary, Strategic Policy and Reform Directorate

Jeff McGuinness - Head of Budget Sustainability Division

Aidan McMahon - Grade 5, Strategic Policy and Reform

The officials provided the Committee with an update on the Fiscal Framework.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the current status of the discussions with the UK Government regarding a more permanent Fiscal Framework and the need for agreement around a Needs Based Fiscal Floor.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request that the Department keeps the Committee regularly updated surrounding developments regarding the Fiscal Framework.

The officials left the meeting at 2:32pm.

9. Northern Ireland Fiscal Council - Oral Briefing from the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council

The following officials joined the meeting at 2:40pm;

Sir Robert Chote - Chair, Northern Ireland Fiscal Council

Jonathan McAdams - Chief of Staff, Northern Ireland Fiscal Council

Maureen O'Reilly - Member, Northern Ireland Fiscal Council.

The officials briefed the Committee on the work of the Fiscal Council. The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the draft Programme for Government, the Interim Fiscal Framework and the forthcoming Fiscal Council Bill.

The officials left the meeting at 3:31pm.

7. SR 2024/172 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still Births) (Extension) (No.3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

That the Committee for Finance has considered SR 2024/172 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still Births) (Extension) (No.3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 and subject to the Examiner's report, recommends that it be approved by the Assembly.

Agreed: The Committee has considered SR 2024 No. 172 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still-Births (Extension) (No.3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 and, subject to the Examiner's report, has no objection to the Rule.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue a press release highlighting the Committee's support for the introduction of Baby Loss Certificates to mark baby Loss Awareness Week.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Centre for Public Policy and Administration - Invitation

The Chairperson referred to an invitation and background paper that Members had received at the launch of the Centre for Public Policy and Administration on Friday 25th October at Queen's University Belfast. The Centre is a new initiative at Queen's University designed to strengthen collaboration between academia and policy-makers.

The Committee noted the invitation and background paper.

3.2 UK Government Press Release - International Investment Summit and 3.3. UK Government Press Release - National Wealth Fund

The Committee noted two UK Government press releases regarding the International Investment Summit and the National Wealth Fund. The press releases announced details of an International Investment Summit which will take place on 14th October and the second on the establishment of a new National Wealth Fund.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department for details of interactions with these bodies and initiatives to ascertain if the Department are capitalising on funding and support that might be available.

3.4 Open Government Network Northern Ireland

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Chair of the Open Government Network Northern Ireland. The Network has requested an opportunity to brief the Committee on how the Open Government Partnership works, the current status of Northern Ireland's Open Government Partnership membership and how the role of the Committee and the wider Assembly may play in the future.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing with Government Network Northern Ireland before the end of the year.

4. Draft Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of the 25 September 2024.

8. Matters Arising

8.1 Minister for Finance - Apple Settlement

The Committee noted a response from the Minister for Finance regarding the decision from the European Union Court of Justice judgement on the Apple tax settlement. The Minister has indicated that the Department will continue to explore any opportunity for mutual benefit that this settlement may bring as part of wider discussions with the Irish Government.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request that the Department keep the Committee updated surrounding any discussions that the Minister has in relation to the settlement.

Phillip Brett left at 3.35pm and returned at 3.37pm.

8.2 Department of Finance - City & Growth Deal Projects

The Committee noted a response from the Department in relation to the use of ISNI Investing Activity Reports – City & Growth Deal Projects. The Department has indicated that they will ensure that the City & Growth Deals quarterly update reports are sent to the Committee for consideration for future detailed oral briefings.

8.3 Department of Finance - Buildings Regulations and associated matters– Draft correspondence to the Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Committee noted a response from CBD regarding Buildings Regs and DOF's role following the publication of the further findings of the Grenfell Inquiry. The Department indicated that their Building Regulations team is working to make Statutory Rule (SR) '*The Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024*' and also provided the most up to date position in respect of the work of the Task and Finish Group, noting its next meeting is due to take place on 5 November 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule further written briefings from the Department on this issue and also agreed to seek information on any work being done around mica and housing in border areas.

8.4 Department of Finance - Dispute Resolution process regarding the Troubles Permanent Disablement Scheme

The Committee noted a response from the Department in relation to the Dispute Resolution process regarding the Troubles Permanent Disablement Scheme. The Department indicated that Treasury officials have provided advice to the Chief Secretary and are awaiting a readout in the coming days.

8.5 Department of Finance - Draft Programme for Government

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding the Draft Programme for Government. The Department has an important role in other key elements under the Reform and Transformation of Public Services immediate priority. The Department indicated a central component of this is the work of the new Public Sector Transformation Board and how a Sustainability Plan will also be at the heart of this transformation.

8.6 Department of Finance - Support for those registering deaths and still-births

The Committee noted a response from the Department in relation to support provided to people registering deaths and still-births, particularly those whose first language is not English. The Department indicated that GRO provides arrangements to cover the costs for the provision of the translation services by a district registration office to enable a person whose first language is not English to register a death/stillbirth.

8.7 Department of Finance - Increasing Insurance Premiums

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding implications for the budget of increasing insurance premiums for the public sector and NICS. The Department indicated how Section 4.4 of Managing Public Money NI provides advice and guidance on insurance however the public purse is uniquely able to finance restitution of damaged assets or deal with other risks. However, the Department cannot comment on arrangements for self-insuring in the wider public sector.

8.8 Department of Finance - Interim Public Sector Transformation Board

The Committee noted a response from the Department in relation to the Committee's request for an oral briefing from the Interim Public Sector Transformation Board (PSTB). The Department indicated that they have raised this request with PSTB and will arrange a suitable date in due course.

8.9 Department of Finance - Joint Exchequer Committee Meetings

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding formal Joint Exchequer Committee (JEC) meetings. The Department indicated that the inaugural JEC meeting to take place to date was to agree and sign the Interim Fiscal Framework on 21 May 2024. The Department also indicated that the Terms of Reference have also been published.

8.10 Department of Finance - Ministerial Engagement with UK Financial Services Bodies and Banks

The Committee noted a response from the Department in relation to the Minister's work regarding the implementation of the new regulatory regime and work with Executive colleagues. The Department indicated that the Minister has met with the Association of British Insurers and British Insurance Brokers' Association to discuss

increased insurance prices on Tuesday 3 September and will also hold a Banking Roundtable with stakeholders from the banking and financial services industry on 20th November 2024.

The Department have also indicated that a summary report will be produced following the event which will be shared with the Committee, in due course.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask if the Minister has had any policy briefings regarding interventions on fiscal matters and powers.

8.11 Department of Finance - Northern Ireland Investment Fund

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding the Committees request for a written briefing on what work has been progressed under the Fund and how DoF fits into the governance framework of the Fund. The Department provided further information on the fund including overarching objectives, projects supported to date and the board's governance arrangements.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask what was the criteria regarding the investment fund and the rationale for those projects being chosen against the criteria set. The Committee also agreed to seek clarity from the Department on what private sector means, if it includes social enterprises and would they consider setting up a fund specifically around social economy enterprises with a particular criteria in relation to social deprivation.

8.12 Department of Finance - Peaks and troughs in Expenditure

The Committee noted a response from the Department in relation to Monthly Outturn Briefings and anticipated peaks and troughs in the departments' expenditure. This was highlighted in the context of the WMS statement about the cash advance to DAERA from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund on the 28 August 2024.

The Department indicated how budgets are managed on an accruals basis in line with government's resource accounting and budgeting guidance. They also provided further information regarding the supply process, advance (for civil contingencies) and the DAERA advance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to bring this item back to next week's meeting on the 9 October to allow for discussion with the Deputy Chair.

Gerry Carroll left the meeting at 3.49pm.

8.13 Department of Finance - Pre-recorded Interviews

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding the pre-recorded Interview Process in the NICS. The Department provided further information surrounding detail on the guidance on compatible devices, the rationale for those being abroad not being able to conduct the interview on a mobile device and a breakdown of the specific technical issues which impacted 427 candidates.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department for additional information surrounding the appeal process, whether or not the issue occurred has become part of the review process and to ask how many complaints the civil service have received in relation to this. The Committee also agreed to ask what additional support for people has been made available for those candidates with additional needs and if there is a guaranteed interview scheme for people with disabilities and if so is it in person.

8.14 Department of Finance - Rating Policy Oral Briefing

The Committee noted a response from the Department in relation to the Committee's request for further information following a briefing from LPS on the analysis carried out on those homeowners who are current beneficiaries of support because of the maximum capital value cap and the cross-jurisdiction comparison of non-domestic vacant property.

The Department supplied further information on the number of maximum capital value properties also in receipt of another relief. They also supplied further information regarding the cross-jurisdiction comparison of non-domestic vacant property in Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland.

8.15 Department of Finance - Revised Civil Service Discipline Policy

The Committee noted a response from the Department following the Committee's request for a specific and definite timeline in relation to the revised Civil Service Discipline Policy.

The Department indicated that while the review has been completed, they are unable to give a definitive timeline as implementation of the revised Discipline policy may be impacted by progress of consultation with CTUS.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the key Civil Service Unions to seek their views on their policy.

Steve Aiken declared an interest in relation to being a UNITE Union Member.

8.16 Department of Finance - UK Shared Prosperity Fund

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding the Committee's request to be kept updated on developments relating to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and its replacement scheme.

The Department indicated how officials continue to press the need for urgent clarity with Whitehall officials and it is anticipated that further information will be made available by the UK Government as part of the Autumn statement on the 30th October 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to copy this correspondence to all statutory committees for their consideration.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department to keep the Committee updated on all UK Government funding that has replaced EU funding.

8.17 Department of Finance - Unfilled Vacancies across the NICS

The Committee noted a response from the Department in relation to unfilled vacancies across the NICS. The Department provided further information across the following areas: further data in regarding actual vacancies/notional savings, the historical context of the level and the depth of vacancies by level & grade, specific business/service areas impacted, information on any potential plan to address them; and the impact these vacancies are having on service delivery.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward this correspondence to other statutory Committees, with a view to those Committees taking forward the issue with their retrospective Departments.

8.18 Hansard - Financial Provisions Bill

The Committee noted Hansard transcripts of recent evidence sessions held with DoF officials on the Financial Provisions Bill on the 18 September 2024.

8.19 Department of Finance – Quarterly Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS)

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding quarterly sickness absence in the NICS. The Department indicated that the NICS is continually analysing reasons for sick absence and is taking action to target interventions to reduce absence. The detail of the range of interventions was also provided to the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule an oral briefing with the Strategic Director of the NICS on the 20 November 2024 for these issues to be discussed.

10. Correspondence

- i. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding appointments to the Board of the Utility Regulator.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department for further information on the public appointments process, to seek clarity on the Department's role in the process, and to request a list of the public appointments that have been made in the last 18 months. The Committee also agreed to ask for a list of current Permanent Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries across all department.

11. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the Forward Work Programme, as drafted.

The Committee noted the following evidence sessions as part of the Forward Work Programme:

- Confirmation is still pending for the oral briefing from the Interim Public Sector Transformation Board scheduled for the 16 October meeting
- The Marriage Bill has been moved forward to the 23 October meeting

- The Strategic Planning session to take place on 13 November
- The NICS Sickness Absence oral briefing will take place during the 20 November meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold its Strategic Planning Session at the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre with arrangements still to be confirmed.

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek written briefings from the Federation of Small Businesses and the Consumer Council to include as part of next week's oral briefing with the Financial Services Union.

12. Any Other Business

Agreed: The Committee agreed to discuss timings of its weekly meetings going forward once a date of moving to the Senate Chamber has been confirmed.

13. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 9 October 2024 at 2:00pm Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:15pm.

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

9 October 2024