



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Committee for Finance

### Minutes of Proceedings

20 November 2024

**Meeting Location:** Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

**Present:** Matthew O'Toole MLA (Chairperson)

Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Phillip Brett MLA

Paul Frew MLA

Eóin Tennyson MLA

Deirdre Hargey MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Nicola Brogan MLA

Steve Aiken MLA

Gerry Carroll MLA

**Apologies:** None

**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 2:03pm in public session.

## **1. Apologies**

As above.

## **2. Declaration of Interests**

Steve Aiken declared an interest regarding making representations on behalf of his constituents regarding sickness absence issues relating to prison officers with officials from the NICS HR later in the meeting.

Deirdre Hargey declared an interest regarding immediate family members working in the NICS with regard to the NICS HR briefing.

## **3. Chairperson's Business**

### **3.1 & 3.2 Finance Minister Written Statements – Budget 2025-26**

The Chairperson referred Members to two written statements by the Minister of Finance regarding the 2025-26 Budget and another in relation to changes to the 2025-26 Resource DEL Barnett consequentials, as notified by Treasury on 30 October. Both statements were emailed to Members on the 13 November.

### **3.3 Interparliamentary Forum meeting – Joint Statement**

The Chairperson referred Members to a statement following the Interparliamentary Forum, which took place on the 15 November in Parliament Buildings.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to invite the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to the Interparliamentary Finance Committee Forum (IFCF) on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2025 to discuss the process for budget settlements for devolved administrations and reflect the wider picture of relationships between the UK Government and devolved administrations.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to invite the Finance Minister to the IFCF in March 2025 to talk about the Executive Restoration Package Settlement and her work on Budget Sustainability and the Interim Fiscal Framework.

### **3.4 Business Coalition – Request to Present to Committee**

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from a business group coalition regarding a briefing request to brief Members on the UK Budget impact and business rates relief.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule an informal meeting with the business group coalition prior to the Christmas Recess.

### **3.5 LCM – Data (Use and Access) Bill**

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Department in relation to a forthcoming Legislative Consent Memorandum on the Data (Use and Access) Bill. The Department indicated that officials are currently drafting the Legislative Consent Motion and associated documentation to allow this process to be triggered and will be brought through the Executive in the near future.

### **3.6 Creation of a Private Entity to use FTC for Development**

The Chairperson referred to a debate in Plenary earlier in the week regarding the Tribeca development and the creation of a private entity to utilise FTC for development.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department regarding a range of issues relating to FTC.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to commission research by RalSe to look at how FTC is used in neighbouring jurisdictions in the UK and Ireland including any models used for regeneration.

### **3.7 NICS Contracts with Fujitsu**

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from an individual regarding concerns about Fujitsu being awarded the NOVA contract. This issue has been pursued by the Committee previously and is maintaining a watching brief.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek an update regarding Fujitsu being awarded the NOVA contract.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Education Committee to ask the reasons for ending of the Fujitsu contract for a new IT system for schools in Northern Ireland by the Education Authority.

## **4. Draft Minutes of Proceedings**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 6 November 2024.

## **5. Matters Arising**

The Committee noted the rationale and Terms of Reference for the Inquiry into the Banking and Financial Services Landscape.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to amend the wording to the first Term of Reference to read, *Consider the current context/landscape of Banking and Financial Services here, including the impact of bank branch closures on individuals and businesses, as well as the issues unique to Northern Ireland that mitigate against financial inclusion and the extent to which the financial services sector is supporting micro business and social enterprise in Northern Ireland; and consideration of the new Financial Services & Markets Act 2023 impact in NI.*

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the Terms of Reference, as per the revised wording agreed, should be published on the Committee webpage.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that further briefings are scheduled for the Inquiry in the appropriate points as part of the Committee's the Forward Work Programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to look at the previous meeting of the Agriculture Committee from 2012 and 2013 where banks gave evidence to that Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request a readout from the Department on the Ministerial Banking roundtable including stakeholders in attendance which took place on the 20 November.

The Committee noted a copy of correspondence sent by the Consumer Council from the Chancellor of the Exchequer to the Chief Executive of the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) providing recommendations for the FCA.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed for the Clerk to liaise with the Consumer Council to consider these recommendations.

The Committee noted the actions from the Strategic Planning Session, which took place on Wednesday 13 November.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the following actions:

- To seek an update from the Department regarding the practicalities of, and timescale for introduction of the Registration of Deaths and Stillbirths Bill, the Fiscal Council Bill, the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill and the Financial Provisions Bill.
- To schedule time for Members to discuss a potential Committee motion in relation to the Budget Process with the Clerk to begin compiling a draft text for Members to consider.
- To add the issue of inheritance tax for farmers to the list of potential themes for the upcoming Budget Event in 2025.
- To request an oral evidence session from the Department regarding the Business Sustainability Plan Annexes relating to potential revenue raising.
- To schedule evidence sessions as part of the Committee's FWP about the issue surrounding potential revenue raising ideas including potential modelling and rates comparability.

- To seek further information from Paul Johnston (former Fiscal Commission NI Chair) in relation to how much Northern Ireland is spending per head in relation to public services.
- That the potential for the development of a mutual bank would be a separate follow-on inquiry.
- The title of the inquiry as follows: *Finance Committee Inquiry into the Northern Ireland Banking and Financial Services Landscape*.
- The Clerk will bring forward revised Terms of Reference to the next meeting as per Members' discussion.
- The Inquiry will not use Citizen Space for a Call for Evidence as engagement will be undertaken directly with relevant stakeholders.
- Advice NI should be added to the list of stakeholders.
- The Committee will schedule a visit to Kilkeel Banking Hub, and will consider other relevant visits.
- To hold a pre- brief ahead of the briefing from the Minister at the Committee meeting on the 27th November.
- To add the area of shared services and staff allocation to areas of question to the HR NICS Sickness Absence 23/24 oral evidence session on the 20th November with Departmental officials.

### **5.1 Secretary of State - City and Growth Deals**

The Committee noted a response from the Secretary for State regarding City and Growth Deals. The pause to the Mid South West and the Causeway Coast and Glens Growth Deals has been lifted and as with previous deals, a rigorous value for money assessment will be carried out as part of the review of the business cases for projects to ensure best value is being delivered.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule a visit to Belfast Studios and other projects relevant to the Belfast City Regional Deal.

### **5.2 Minister of Finance - 2024/2025 October Monitoring exercise**

The Committee noted an urgent oral statement from the Finance Minister in relation to the 2024-25 October Monitoring exercise. A copy of the statement was emailed to Members on the 11 November.

### **5.3 Minister of Finance - Audit Committee NIPSO-NIAO-NIAC Budget**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Finance Minister to the Audit Committee regarding DoF's view on the draft Budget Submissions for 2025-26 for the three non-Ministerial Public Bodies (NIPSO, NIAO and NIAC) ahead of the Audit Committees meeting on 13 November.

### **5.4 DALO Readout Extract - 23 October 2024**

The Committee noted the DALO Readout extract for the 23 October 2024. This is how the Committee team commission requests to the Department and they have 10 working days to provide the information unless an explanation is given for any delay.

### **5.5 Department of Finance - October Monitoring Round & Departmental Over commitments**

The Committee noted a response from the Department in relation to the October Monitoring Round and Departmental Over commitments. The Department indicated that they would inform the Committee about the outcome of the October Monitoring Round.

### **5.6 Department of Finance - Office Estate Strategy**

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding queries raised by Members relating to the Office Estate Strategy. The Department indicated that the Central Advisory Unit within LPS holds responsibility for policy, advice and guidance on the disposal of surplus public sector assets in Northern Ireland.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask the Department for further detail in relation to the full audit trail for the sale of Netherleigh House.

### **5.7 Department of Finance - Public Sector Transformation Board**

The Committee noted a response from the Department in relation to the Interim Public Sector Transformation Board (PSTB). The Committee requested a copy of correspondence from HOCS to the Minister as well as the Minister's response to this

correspondence. The Committee has now received a copy of all correspondence between HOCS and the Finance Minister on the work of the interim PSTB.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask the Department for the minutes from the 31<sup>st</sup> July meeting between the Finance Minister and HOCS.

### **5.8 Department of Finance - Budget 25/26 Future Years Information Gathering Exercise**

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding the Budget for 25-26 Future Years Information Gathering Exercise. The Department have indicated that DfC, DoF and DE responded to the Department's deadline of the 4 October while DAERA, DfE, DoH, DfI and DoJ were late with their returns and the response from TEO is still outstanding.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to other statutory Committees to consider the issue with their own Departments.

### **5.9 Department of Finance - Support for families with multiple births**

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding the support for families with multiple births. The Department have indicated that they do not believe that any of the measures are relevant to the remit of the Department as it is not responsible for employment law.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the individuals indicating the view of the Department.

### **5.13 Minister of Finance - Written Statement on Public Expenditure**

The Committee noted a written statement from the Finance Minister in relation to Technical Adjustments following the 2024-25 October Monitoring Round. The statement was also issued to Members on the 18 November.

Deirdre Hargey left the meeting at 2.54pm and returned at 2.59pm.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 2.54pm and returned at 3.23pm.



## **6. SR 2024/191 The Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024**

The Committee for Finance considered SR 2024/191 The Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 which will enable the Department of Finance to introduce some new fire safety proposals in Building Regulations.

The Examiner of Statutory Rules has not yet formally reported on the rule however provided a formal note indicating that the rule will not be drawn to the special attention of the Assembly.

**Agreed:** The Committee has considered SR 2024/191 The Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 and, subject to the Examiner's report, has no objection to the Rule.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to send further details regarding fire safety duties from the meeting pack to Gerry Carroll following a query during the session.

## **7. Legislative Consent Memorandum - Property (Digital Assets ETC) Bill - Oral briefing from the Department**

The following representatives joined the meeting at 3.14pm;

Michael Foster - Head of Civil Law Reform, DSO, Department of Finance

Fidelma O'Hagan PLO, Civil Law Reform

The officials briefed the Committee on the Legislative Consent Memorandum Property (Digital Assets ETC) Bill.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the timeline for introduction and the consultation to date.

Diane Forsythe left the meeting at 3.16pm and returned at 3.19pm.

Diane Forsythe left the meeting at 3.29pm and returned at 3.32pm.

The officials left the meeting at 3.46pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the FCA to elaborate on the figures for Northern Ireland referred to in the FCA 2023 Online Crypto Assets Consumer Report.

#### **8. Sickness Absence - NICS Absence 2023/24 and HR matters - Oral briefing from the Department**

The following representatives joined the meeting at 3.47pm;

Catherine Shannon - Deputy Secretary, NICS Human Resources

Debbie Sherlock - Director of People Services

Dr David Mills - Lead Medical Officer, NICS Occupational Health Services

The officials briefed the Committee on NICS Absence 2023/24 and other HR matters.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including sickness absence statistics in the NICS for the financial year 2023/24, comparison with other jurisdictions in the UK & Ireland and vacancies across the NICS.

Gerry Carroll left the meeting at 4.54pm

Eóin Tennyson left the meeting at 5.11pm.

The officials left the meeting at 5.12pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for a range of information flowing from the discussions with officials.

## **9. Government Accounts Branch Overview - Oral briefing from the Department**

The following representatives joined the meeting at 5.19pm;

Stuart Stevenson - Treasury Officer of Accounts and Head of Accountability & Financial Management Division

Joanne Warnock - Head of Government Accounts Branch

Heather Robinson - Deputy Head of Government Accounts Branch

The officials briefed the Committee on the role and work of the Branch in cash management in respect of the Consolidated Fund.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the key functions of the Governments Account Branch.

Deirdre Hargey left at 5.03pm and returned at 5.08pm.

Nicola Brogan left the meeting at 5.30pm.

Steve Aiken left the meeting at 5.40pm.

The officials left the meeting at 5.41pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask officials to give consideration on how the Committee can support the work of the Government Accounts Branch going forward.

## **10. Correspondence**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to Items i-iv being carried forward to the next meeting.

- v. The Committee noted a Hansard transcript for the oral briefing from 6 November with Department officials on the Budget update.
- vi. The Committee noted a Hansard transcript for the oral briefing from 6 November with the Federation of Small Businesses as part of its inquiry into Banking and Financial Services.
- vii. The Committee noted a Hansard transcript for the oral briefing from 6 November with the Consumer Council as part of its inquiry into Banking and Financial Services.
- viii. The Committee noted correspondence from Committee for Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs and Committee for Infrastructure regarding issues regarding the A5 Western Transport Corridor and the Ulster Farmers Union.
- ix. The Committee noted a report from the Public Accounts Committee on Excess Votes (NI) 2023/24.

## **11. Draft Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered the Forward Work Programme, as drafted.

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

Gerry Carroll left the meeting at 4.57pm.

## **12. Any Other Business**

The Chairperson discussed a request from the Department regarding potential subordinate legislation coming to the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek an update from the Department on the timetable for subordinate legislation.

### **13. Date and Time of next meeting**

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 27 November 2024 at 2:00pm Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:44pm.

**Matthew O'Toole MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for Finance**

**27 November 2024**