



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Committee for Finance

### Minutes of Proceedings

23 October 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  
Gerry Carroll MLA  
Deirdre Hargey MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Nicola Brogan MLA

**Apologies:** Steve Aiken 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 2:00pm in public session.

### **1. Apologies**

As above.

### **2. Declaration of Interests**

None.

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

The Chairperson referred Members to correspondence on the June Monitoring Round that was included in today's meeting pack.

Deirdre Hargey joined the meeting at 2.06pm.

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

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 16 October 2024.

### **5. Matters Arising**

#### **5.1 Index of Matters Arising**

The Committee noted the index table of Matters Arising carried over from the 16 October meeting.

#### **5.2 Chief Secretary to the Treasury to Finance Minister - City and Growth Deals**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to the Finance Minister regarding clarity on the position in respect to the City and Growth Deal Programme.

### **5.3 Minister of Finance - Baby Loss Certificates**

The Committee noted a response from the Finance Minister in relation to Baby Loss Certificates. The Minister has outlined her intentions to bring forward an enabling power in the Registration of Deaths and Still-Births Bill to take forward a Baby Loss Certificate Scheme through secondary legislation.

### **5.4 Department of Finance - NICS Sickness Absence**

The Committee noted a response from the Department to the Committee for Justice regarding Civil Service Sickness Absence Policy, specifically, in relation to psychological and mental health issues.

### **5.27 Committee for Justice - Civil Service Staff Handbook Sickness Policy**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Justice to the Department of Finance outlining concerns on the treatment of PTSD under the NICS Staff Handbook Sickness Policy.

### **5.5 Department of Finance - NICS HR Return**

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding the NICS sickness absence policy including information surrounding support for staff with PTSD.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider 5.4, 5.27 and 5.5 as part of its oral evidence session on NICS Sickness Absence which will take place on 20 November.

### **5.6 Department of Finance - Fiscal Council Bill**

The Committee noted a response from the Department in relation to the classification when drafting the Fiscal Council Bill. The Department considered a number of options regarding classification when drafting the Fiscal Council Bill policy document including how the independent Scottish Fiscal Commission was established.

### **5.7 Law Commission - Report on Apartments**

The Committee noted a report from the Northern Ireland Law Commission on apartments. The Law Commission published this report in 2013 and there are a series of recommendations to address legal problems and to address management problems.

#### **5.8 LINK - Cash Access Assessment Outcomes**

The Committee noted a number of Cash Access assessment outcomes carried out by LINK for Belfast Connswater, Belfast Castlecourt, Belfast Royal Avenue and Downpatrick.

#### **5.9 Hansard Transcript of Oral Evidence Sessions - Fiscal Framework**

The Committee noted a Hansard transcript of the recent evidence session held on the Fiscal Framework with Departmental officials.

#### **5.10 Hansard Transcript of Oral Evidence Sessions - Northern Ireland Fiscal Council**

The Committee noted a Hansard transcript of the recent evidence session held on the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council with the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council officials.

#### **5.11 Hansard Transcript of Oral Evidence Sessions - Draft Programme for Government**

The Committee noted a Hansard transcript of the recent evidence session held on the Draft Programme for Government with Departmental officials.

#### **5.12 Department of Finance - October Monitoring Round 2024-25**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to the October Monitoring Round. The Department indicated that they have commissioned the 2024-2025 October Monitoring Round from Departments with returns due back by Friday 25 October.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that any follow-up queries in relation to this issue could be addressed during the oral briefing with the Minister for Finance on the 27 November.

#### **5.20 Department of Finance - Dispute resolution Troubles Permanent Disablement Scheme**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding the dispute resolution process regarding the Troubles Permanent Disablement Scheme. The Department have indicated that a meeting was held with Treasury officials on 1 October and officials were unable to provide a precise timeframe for resolution of dispute in relation to funding for the scheme. In addition, the Finance Minister also raised the issue during a bilateral meeting with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 3 October.

#### **5.21 Department of Finance - Shared Prosperity Fund**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to the UK Government's Shared Prosperity Fund. The Department have indicated that DoF officials have provided technical advice on guidance to enable funding to flow however the Department does not hold information on what funding has been received by organisations or remains unclaimed as they do not deliver or manage these funds directly and how it is the role of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider this as part of the Budget briefing on 6 November.

#### **5.22 Department of Finance - Permanent Secretaries, Deputy Secretaries and Public Appointments**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding the Committee's request for a list of all current Permanent Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries across all NICS Departments which the Department has provided.

#### **5.23 Department of Finance - Budget Sustainability Plan**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to the Budget Sustainability Plan. The Department have indicated that no issues were raised by Treasury in relation to a delay in the publication of the Sustainability Plan. They also indicated that the 2024-2025 income generation measures have been implemented by the Department and final decisions around 2025-2026 measures will be taken once budget envelopes are known.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to seek the perspective of the new UK Government in respect of the Northern Ireland Executive Restoration Package Settlement. The Committee agreed to ask the Chief Secretary to make Treasury officials available for Members to undertake their statutory role in scrutinising regarding the application and implementation of the Settlement through the DoF. The Committee agreed to write to the Secretary of State for NI in similar terms.

The Committee also agreed to copy the correspondence to the incoming Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Tonia Antoniazzi MP.

#### **5.24 Department of Finance - HR Services across NICS an outsourcing of HR Functions**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding HR Services across the NICS and the outsourcing of HR Functions. The Department have provided detail on the structure of NICS HR as of June 2024; including the breakdown of staffing in each division within the service.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider this correspondence as part of its oral briefing on NICS sickness absence on 20 November.

#### **5.25 Department of Finance - Departmental over commitments risks**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to Departmental over commitments risks. The Department has indicated that there will be a significant degree of certainty over the Executive's final 2024-2025 funding position. Once the budget outcome is known on 30 October, the Minister intends to announce the October Monitoring exercise in early November.

Members reflected on the duty of Departments to communicate budget issues to their relevant Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask the Department to inform Committee immediately when there is an October Monitoring Round outcome, and that further questions will be raised with Department officials regarding this issue at its oral briefing which will take place on 6 November on the Budget update.

#### **5.26 Department of Finance - Office Estate Strategy Update**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding the NICS office estate strategy. The Department has provided a copy of the Estate Strategy as well as details of recent and ongoing sales processes.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request that the full audit process for all of the sales is provided including the full disposal report.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 2.29pm and returned at 2.34pm.

## **6. Work of the Interim Public Sector Transformation Board (PSTB) - Oral briefing**

The following official joined the meeting at 2:30pm;

Jayne Brady - Head of the Civil Service and Chair of the Interim Public Sector Transformation Board

Neil Gibson - Permanent Secretary, Department of Finance

Aidan McMahon - Director Fiscal Policy Division, Department of Finance

David Hughes - Head of Corporate Services, Department of Finance

The officials briefed the Committee on the work of the Interim PSTB.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the Interim PSTB and its work to date and the Northern Ireland Audit Office Report on progressing implementation of the RHI Public Inquiry recommendations.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 3.03pm and returned at 3.04pm.

Gerry Carroll left the meeting at 3.14pm and returned at 3.24pm.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 3.39pm and returned at 3.46pm.

Eóin Tennyson left the meeting at 3.44pm and returned at 3.48pm.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 3.52pm and returned at 3.56pm.

Paul Frew left the meeting at 4.09pm and returned at 4.17pm.

The officials left the meeting at 4:29pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Head of the Civil Service to request the following information:

- Information on all 29 proposals including those in relation to the Health Bids and the change on this Bid from Phase 1 to Phase 2.
- To ask that HoCS share her letter the of 9 September to the Finance Minister, as well as the Minister's response. These will also be requested from the Department.
- Information on which Departments missed the 18 October deadline for revised submissions and to ask whether departments knew there was flexibility regarding this deadline, as well as which departments did not meet the deadline and whether there were any impacts flowing from submissions being returned late.
- Clarity on dates relating to RHI, specifically the dates RHI papers regarding the closure of the Scheme and change to the tariff were sent to for inclusion on the agenda for Executive meetings but not put on the agenda.
- Details on training provided for Ministers in the Executive.

## **7. Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill - Oral Briefing from Departmental Officials**

The following representatives joined the meeting at 4:30pm;

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

Martin Tyrell - Policy Advisor Civil Law Reform, Department of Finance



The officials briefed the Committee on the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the current timescale of the Bill.

The officials left the meeting at 4.44pm.

## **8. Outturn and Forecast Outturn Data October 2024-2025 Departmental Written Briefing**

The Committee considered a written paper from the Department regarding the Outturn and Forecast Outturn Data for October 2024-2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward this written briefing to the other Statutory Committees and the Audit Committee.

## **9. Correspondence**

i. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Communities from the previous week relating to a request to all Departments for information in relation to work and projects ongoing which involve engagement with disability fora and their Members.

ii. The Committee noted the Annual Report and Accounts 2023-2024 for the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation.

iii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department on the 2025-2026 Budget and Future Years Information Gathering Exercise.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to other statutory committees and the Audit Committee to highlight the exercise.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask the Department how many Departments responded on or before the deadline of the exercise and if any were late.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask the Department for more information from LPS regarding the revaluation of domestic rates by 2030 in terms of background

work and timescales. The Committee also agreed to request an oral briefing from the Chief Executive of LPS as part of its Forward Work Plan.

iv. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for the Economy regarding the three-year budget information gathering exercise.

v. The Committee noted the Annual Report of the Northern Ireland Local Government Commissioner for Standards.

vi. The Committee noted the Northern Ireland Ombudsman's Report for 2023-2024.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the report to the Audit Committee.

vii. The Committee noted two items of correspondence from a member of the public relating to support for families with multiple births.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department to ascertain if the recommendations are applicable to its remit.

viii. The Committee noted the 24<sup>th</sup> report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

ix. The Committee noted correspondence from the Chairpersons' Liaison Group on following their meeting on 18 June 2024 with an update to Committees.

## **10. 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:

- Oral evidence session with Open Government Northern Ireland still not confirmed.
- Update on DoF Memorandum of Reply to PAC Report regarding Broadband Investment in Northern Ireland is confirmed for 11 December meeting.

- Building Regulations and association matters to be scheduled for February 2025.

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

Gerry Carroll left the meeting at 4.57pm.

### **11. Any Other Business**

The Chairperson encouraged Members to publicise the forthcoming inquiry on financial services with their local constituency stakeholders.

The Chairperson reflected on the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council conference that took place on Tuesday 22 October where the Chairperson made a speech regarding the work of the Committee.

The Chairperson updated the Committee in relation to chairing a panel on the use of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) against environmental campaigners which is taking place on Thursday 24 October.

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

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 6 November 2024 at 2:00pm Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:06pm.

**Matthew O'Toole MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for Finance**

**6 November 2024**