



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

25 September 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

Nicola Brogan MLA

Steve Aiken MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Gerry Carroll MLA

Apologies: Deirdre Hargey MLA

Eóin Tennyson MLA

In Attendance: Peter Hall Committee Clerk

Clairita Frazer Assistant Assembly Clerk (Virtually)

Sarah-Anne McKinley Assistant Assembly Clerk

Stephen Magee Clerical Supervisor

Heather Graham Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 1:06pm in public session.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 The Chairperson referred to an article in Which? Magazine indicating how Northern Ireland has suffered the highest number of bank closures amongst the devolved regions. The Chairperson wanted to raise this issue in relation to the banking and financial services landscape.

4. Draft Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 18 September 2024.

5. Matters Arising

5.1 Department of Finance – Concerns around increased insurance premiums

The Committee noted a response from the Department on engagements between the Minister of Finance and Departmental officials following the Minister's vast concerns around the cost of insurance premiums in Northern Ireland.

5.2 Department of Finance – Student Loan Underspend explanation

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding a policy change with respect to Student Loans which will see a further reduction in the Executive's ring-fenced Resource DEL allocation for Student Loans.

The Committee indicated they would seek clarity regarding the DfE - 2023-24 Forecast Outturn for Ring-fenced Resource DEL funding methodology from Joanne McBurney when next at the Committee.

5.3 Interparliamentary Finance Committee Forum – Draft correspondence to the Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Committee considered a letter drafted by the Interparliamentary Finance Committee Forum on behalf of the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Assembly to encourage the new Chancellor to engage with the devolved regions – invitations have been issued to the Chancellor and Ministerial Finance colleagues in the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Assembly as well as to the Interparliamentary Finance Committee Forum.

The Chairperson declared an interest as a former Civil Servant of the UK Treasury Department.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the letter should be issued to the Chancellor.

5.4 & 5.5 Hansard Transcript of Oral Evidence Sessions on Rating Policy & Deaths and Still-Birth Legislation

The Committee noted Hansard transcripts of recent evidence sessions held on Rating Policy with LPS Officials and on Deaths and Still-Birth Legislation with GRO Officials.

6. Fiscal Council Bill – 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 1:18pm;

Tony Simpson - Deputy Secretary, Strategic Policy and Reform Directorate

Wendy Lecky – Director, Strategic Policy and Reform

Sarah Wilson - Grade 5, Strategic Policy and Reform

The officials briefed the Committee on the proposed Fiscal Council Bill.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the contents and timescale of the bill.

Phillip Brett joined the meeting at 1.24pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request further information from the Department in relation to the ONS suggestion regarding modelling for the Fiscal Council being established as a non-departmental public body.

The officials left the meeting at 2:03pm.

7. Public Sector Transformation Board Update – Oral Briefing from Departmental Officials

The following officials joined the meeting at 2:04pm;

Tony Simpson - Deputy Secretary, Strategic Policy and Reform Directorate

Aidan McMahon - Director, Fiscal Policy Division

Julianne Kieran - Principal Economist, Strategic Policy Division.

The officials briefed the Committee on the work of the Interim Public Sector Transformation Board. The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed including progress of the Interim Board to date, the current structure and Terms of Reference (ToR).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Finance to seek clarity on time scales regarding the ToR for the full Board and to ask that the Board should consider representation from the wider public sector.

The officials left the meeting at 2:57 pm.

8. City & Region Growth Deals – Oral Briefing from Departmental Officials

. The following officials joined the meeting at 3:00pm

Jillian Gilmore – Director, City and Growth Deals

Jason Beggs, Deputy Principal, City and Growth Deals

The officials briefed the Committee on the current position regarding the four City and Region Growth Deals. The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed including the progress of the four deals to date, communication from the Treasury to the DoF and city deals in neighbouring jurisdictions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to counterpart Finance Committee's in Wales and Scotland to ask what information they have regarding any pauses on city deals in their areas.

The officials left the meeting at 3:45pm.

Agreed The Committee agreed to move into closed session at 3:46pm.

9. Budget Sustainability Plan – Oral Briefing from Departmental Officials

The following officials joined the meeting at 3:46pm

Jeff McGuinness - Head of Central Expenditure Division

David Killops - Deputy Principal, Public Spending Directorate

The officials briefed the Committee on the Budget Sustainability Plan. The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed including the direction and key components of the Plan.

Nicola Brogan left the meeting at 4.11pm.

The officials left the meeting at 4:17pm

The Committee moved into public session at 4:17pm

10. Correspondence

- i. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Justice to the Department of Justice regarding the Civil Service Staff Handbook

Steve Aiken declared an interest regarding a meeting he had with officials to discuss prison service staff and mental health issues and referenced how the predecessor Committee for Finance had looked at Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Agreed: Members agreed to ask officials how the Civil Service Sick absence policy deals with PTSD at its oral evidence session on NICS Sickness Absence oral evidence session on 6 November 2024.

11. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the Forward Work Programme, as drafted.

Agreed: Members agreed to begin the Committee on 2 October at the earlier time of 1pm.

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

- Draft PFG and Fiscal Framework as well as Fiscal Council confirmed for the 2 October meeting.
- FSU confirmed for 9 October meeting as well as Cash Access UK and Banking Research.
- Minister not available to brief the Committee until 27 November meeting so 23 October meeting agenda may change.
- Strategic Planning session to take place on 13 November.

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

12. Any Other Business

The Committee discussed the current situation regarding moving Committee rooms to the Senate Chamber for its weekly meetings.

13. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 2 October 2024 at 1:00pm Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:28pm.

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

2 October 2024