



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

6 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

Deirdre Hargey MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Nicola Brogan MLA

Gerry Carroll MLA

Apologies: Steve Aiken MLA

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 2:10pm in public session.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred Members to correspondence from the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council thanking the Chairperson for their contribution to their conference which took place last month.

The Chairperson referred Members to an invitation from Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to the launch of its Annual Human Rights Statement on Monday 9 December in the Long Gallery. A link to register for the event will follow in due course.

The Chairperson referred Members to a paper from the House of Commons on the Chancellor's Autumn Budget.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department what modelling has been done around tax or wage changes in the Budget and whether the Department is

consulting with the Department for Economy or other organisations in relation to this modelling.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Department regarding reform of non-domestic rates.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department if the reform of non-domestic rates is having any impact in relation to the Budget Sustainability Plan.

4. Draft Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 23 October 2024.

5. Matters Arising

5.1 Audit Committee - NIAO Draft Budget 2025-2026

The Committee noted correspondence from the Audit Committee to the Public Accounts Committee seeking their views on the draft Budget submission.

Diane Forsythe declared an interest as being a Member of the Audit Committee and the Public Accounts Committee.

5.2 and 5.3 Queen's University Belfast - Report on Gender Recognition

The Committee noted a response and a report from Queen's University Belfast regarding follow up information from their oral evidence session on the 16 October. They have provided further information about instances where a person can change their gender on documentation/ID documents without needing a Gender Recognition Certificate/birth certificate.

The Committee also requested an update from the Department on what further policy work has been progressed since the report was published. The Department has indicated that the Minister is currently considering the report and its findings. The Department also indicated that DoF officials and their Westminster counterparts held

an initial meeting on this policy area in September 2024 and will continue to liaise regularly going forward.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department to keep the Committee up to date on any further policy development in this area.

5.4 Department of Finance - City and Growth Deals Quarterly Update (October 2024) and 5.5 Department of Finance - City and Growth Deals Annual Progress Report 2023-2024

The Committee noted correspondence and a report from the Department in relation to the City and Growth Deals Quarterly Progress Report for October 2024. The Department indicated that City and Growth Deal funding was paused until the outcome of the Spending Review. The funding has now been restored as per the Treasury's announcement following the Budget on 30 October.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a written briefing around how community organisations are supported to engage with the Growth Deals.

Agree: The Committee agreed the Chairperson would raise the issue of the City and Growth Deals at the Interparliamentary Forum on Intergovernmental Relations which is due to take place on Friday 15th November in Parliament Buildings.

5.6 Department of Finance - Northern Ireland Investment Fund

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding the Northern Ireland Investment Fund. The Committee requested further clarification on a number of issues concerning the Fund including a greater understanding for the rationale that these projects were selected set against the Fund's objectives, a definition of what 'private sector' means and would this include social enterprises. The Committee also asked whether the Department would be supportive of the setting up of a similar fund, focused on supporting investment in social enterprise projects. The Department has provided further information as per the Committee's request.

5.7 Department of Finance - Disability Rights and Representation

The Committee noted a correspondence from the Department to the Committee for Communities relation to disability rights and representation. The Committee for Communities had previously written to the Department on work being taken forward by the Civil Service as an employer to promote disability inclusion and to support the participation of disabled persons in our workforce.

5.8 Department of Finance - NISRA Excess Deaths Explainer

The Committee noted correspondence from the NISRA in relation to the estimates of excess deaths. NISRA had indicated that a supplementary explainer paper would be released and has shared an advanced draft of the paper with comments or feedback from the Committee being sought prior to publication.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Clerk would send an email to Members seeking comments or feedback on the paper and then forward to NISRA for consideration.

6. Inquiry into the Banking and Financial Services Landscape - Oral Briefing from the Consumer Council

The following official joined the meeting at 2.29pm;

Noyona Chundur - Chief Executive, Consumer Council for Northern Ireland

Sean Breen - Director of Financial and Postal Services, Consumer Council for Northern Ireland

Phillip Brett joined the meeting at 2.31pm.

The officials briefed the Committee on the banking landscape for consumers in Northern Ireland.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including financial inclusion, digital literacy and online banking.

The officials left the meeting at 3:19pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Consumer Council to request that any follow up information in relation to households without access to bank accounts, access to foreign currency in cross-borders areas and cash-only payments for goods and services is provided to the Committee.

7. Inquiry into the Banking and Financial Services Landscape - Oral Briefing from the Federation of Small Businesses Northern Ireland (FSB NI)

The following representatives joined the meeting at 3:20pm;

Roger Pollen - Head of FSB NI

Alan Lowry - FSB NI Policy Chair/Environmental Street Furniture

Ross Boyd - Ross Boyd Chartered Accountants

The officials briefed the Committee on the banking landscape for businesses in Northern Ireland.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including comparisons of business banking with the rest of UK & Ireland and online banking.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 3.27pm and returned at 3.30pm.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 3.31pm.

The officials left the meeting at 4.22pm.

8. Budget update - Oral briefing from Department of Finance officials

The following representatives joined the meeting at 4:23pm;

Joanne McBurney - Budget Director and Head of Public Spending Directorate

Jeff McGuinness - Head of Budget Sustainability Division

The officials briefed the Committee on the Budget.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the Executive baseline, Fiscal Framework and current in-year pressures.

Nicola Brogan declared an interest being a Member of the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee.

The officials left the meeting at 4.48pm.

9. Legislative Consent Memorandum - Property (Digital Assets Etc) Bill

The Chairperson referred Members to correspondence from the Minister for Finance notifying the Committee on how she is seeking Executive agreement to the extension of the Property (Digital Assets etc) Bill to Northern Ireland via a Legislative Consent Motion.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule an urgent briefing from Departmental officials for the 20 November.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request that any responses to the Department's engagement exercise are copied to the Committee and that the Department should provide the Committee with detail on any ongoing discussions between the Department and Westminster where a position(s) has not been finalised; any financial human rights and equality implications (including Article 2 of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland); any regulatory impact; any rural impact; and any data protection implications.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request further information from the Department on crypto trading figures in Northern Ireland. The Committee also agreed to request whether feedback from Northern Ireland stakeholders was considered as part of the UK Law Commission Report on digital assets as personal property.

Gerry Carroll left the meeting at 5.03pm.

10. Correspondence

i. The Committee noted correspondence from Advice Northern Ireland on disparity in the bereavement service offered in Northern Ireland against the wider service offered in the rest of the UK.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward this correspondence to the Department for their views on potential extension of this service and to ask the Department if there has been any potential cross departmental work in this regard.

ii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Justice on the Arbitration Bill Legislative Consent Motion (LCM).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for Justice to let them know that the Committee was content with the proposal on the LCM subject to Executive approval.

iii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department for Infrastructure to the Committee for Infrastructure in relation to electric fleet vehicles.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward this correspondence to the Department to seek further information on the uptake of electric/zero emissions vehicles across the Department. The Committee also agreed to ask the Department how many vehicles are currently being used compared to those being maintained and the cost to the Department.

iv. The Committee noted correspondence from the Public Accounts Committee regarding its primacy over NIAO reports published up to 22 October and has agreed its fifth, sixth and seventh inquiries on developing the skills for Northern Ireland's future, access to general practice in Northern Ireland and reducing adult

reoffending in Northern Ireland. The Committee also has the NIAO's 2nd report on the RHI Inquiry recommendations on 'hold' with primacy in effect.

v. The Committee noted the 25th report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

vi. The Committee noted Hansard transcripts for oral briefings from 23rd October on the Interim Public Service Transformation Board session and the Marriage and Civil partnership session.

vii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Communities to the Minister for Finance regarding potential arrangements for the Housing Executive to borrow funds.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department whether there has been any progression or discussion between the Minister for Communities, the Minister for Finance and the UK Treasury on any potential arrangements.

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:

- Oral evidence session with Open Government Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Investment Fund (widened to include UK Infrastructure Bank/ National Wealth Fund has been confirmed for the 4 December meeting.
- Oral evidence session with the new Chief Executive of LPS has been confirmed for the 11 December meeting.
- Oral evidence session with Department officials on the Legislative Consent Memorandum - Property (Digital Assets Etc) Bill has been scheduled for the 20 November meeting.
- Request from Retail NI to brief the Committee as part of its inquiry into the banking landscape in Northern Ireland.
- Strategic Planning Meeting next week at the Stormont Hotel at 1pm. Papers will be emailed directly to Members.

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

12. Any Other Business

None.

13. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 20 November 2024 at 2:00pm Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:13pm.

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

20 November 2024