



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for Finance

## Minutes of Proceedings

9 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

Eóin Tennyson MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Gerry Carroll MLA

Deirdre Hargey MLA

Steve Aiken MLA

Nicola Brogan MLA

**Apologies:** None

**In Attendance:** Peter Hall Committee Clerk

Sarah-Anne McKinley Assistant Assembly Clerk

Stephen Magee Clerical Supervisor

Heather Graham Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 2:05pm in public session.

### **1. Apologies**

As above.

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

None.

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

3.1 The Chairperson referred to a written Ministerial Statement and copy of the Final Agreed Budget Sustainability Plan. The Plan was originally emailed to Members on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask the Department for clarity on whether the UK Treasury granted an extension for the Budget Sustainability Plan to be published and, if not, have any issues arisen. Members also agreed to seek detail from the Department whether measures outlined in the revenue raising portion of the Plan have been implemented, and which are still to be agreed by the Executive.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask the Department to include the official Jeff McGuinness in the oral briefing on the Budget Update on the 6<sup>th</sup> November to answer any questions on the Budget Sustainability Plan.

3.2 The Chairperson referred to an invitation from the Fiscal Council to the Committee to its second Annual Conference on Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> October at PWC Belfast. The Chairperson will be attending and speaking on the Committee's behalf.

3.3 The Chairperson highlighted how today is the beginning of Baby Loss Awareness Week and reflected on the recent Committee press release on the issue.

Philip Brett joined the meeting at 2.16pm.

3.4 The Chairperson referred to correspondence he received regarding the officials' advice to the Minister with respect Civil Service Election Guidance and the announcement of the June Monitoring Round outcome.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed for the Chairperson to share the correspondence with Members for their consideration.

3.5 The Chairperson informed the Committee that the Interparliamentary Forum (on Intergovernmental Relations) will meet at Parliament Buildings on Friday 15<sup>th</sup> November 2024.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the Chair's attendance and that an invitation be issued to the Rt. Hon. Pat McFadden MP, Minister for Intergovernmental Relations, for him to attend.

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

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2024.

#### **5. Matters Arising**

##### **5.1 & 5.4 Department of Finance - Financial Provisions Bill**

The Committee noted a response from the Department as part of its consideration of the forthcoming Financial Provisions Bill and issues in relation to Mineral and Petroleum Accounts being incorporated into the main Department for the Economy accounts.

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

The Committee noted a response from the Department in relation to the Public Sector Transformation Board. Following the Committee's request for further detail surrounding the detail and value of each project the Department has indicated it would not be appropriate to share this level of detail in advance of the Executive having had the opportunity to fully consider the proposals.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to reiterate to the Department Members' concerns regarding the scrutiny gap that exists regarding the work of the Interim Board, and the urgent need for a timeline for the appointment of a permanent board.

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

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding NICS Sickness absence figures. An oral briefing has been scheduled with Department officials for the 20<sup>th</sup> November to explore the issue further.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask the Department for an outline of the structure of HR Services across the NICS, including personnel in Departments, including their grades, job titles and responsibilities. Members also agreed to seek details of an outsourcing of HR functions, including the specific role of HR Connect.

## **5.5 Hansard Transcript of Oral Evidence Sessions - Fiscal Council Bill**

The Committee noted a Hansard transcript of the recent evidence session held on the upcoming Fiscal Council Bill with Departmental Officials.

## **5.6 Examiner of Statutory Rules - Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules**

The Committee noted the twenty-third report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR). The Committee considered S.R. 2024/172: The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still-Births) (Extension) (No.3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 at its meeting on the 2<sup>nd</sup> October and recommended that the Statutory Rule to be approved by the Assembly, subject to the ESR reporting on the rule.

The Committee noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had no issues to raise with the technical elements of the Statutory Rule. The Debate in Plenary to approve the Rule has been scheduled for Monday 14<sup>th</sup> October. Members noted that the Chairperson will speak on the Committee's behalf at the debate.

### **5.7 Department of Finance - Departmental Response to Members' queries regarding options to legislate for baby Loss Certificates**

The Committee welcomed and noted a response from the Department in relation to the Department's view of options around legislating for baby Loss Certificates.

The Department has indicated that GRO and OLC have worked together to find the best way to pave the way for Baby Loss Certificates and agreed that this would be an enabling power in the Registration Bill that would allow the Certificates to be brought forward through secondary legislation. Due to the time taken to make the necessary changes to the draft Bill the Department is currently considering the impact that this may have on the Bill timetable.

### **5.8 Minister for Finance - Risks Created by Departmental Overcommitments**

The Committee noted a response from the Minister regarding risks created by Departmental overcommitments. The Department have indicated that the £767m over commitment was based on an earlier position which was then updated to £769m due to updated pay assumptions. The guidance on Outturn and Forecast Outturn changed this year to allow departments to record overcommitments against particular areas of spend and it is individual department's responsibility to take action to address these overcommitments to ensure a balanced budget by year end.

In response to the concerning level of departmental overcommitments following the outcome of the June Monitoring round the Minister commissioned an urgent exercise with departments to inform the Executive's consideration of the in-year position. Once this has been completed the outcome will be reported to the Assembly, and a briefing provided to the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask the Department to confirm the date for the announcement of the October Monitoring Round outcome.

## **6. Banking Service Provision – RalSe Oral briefing**

The following official joined the meeting at 2:50pm;

Michael Scholes - Research Officer PSFU

The official briefed the Committee on a paper examining the current banking and financial services landscape in Northern Ireland.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including banking service provision with options for banking such as credit card unions & hubs and the development of a mutual bank.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 2.52pm and returned at 3.02pm.

Eóin Tennyson left the meeting at 3.06pm and returned at 3.11pm.

The official left the meeting at 3:03pm.

## **7. Financial Services Union – Oral Briefing from Departmental Officials**

The following representatives joined the meeting at 3:13pm;

John Burns - President, Financial Services Union

John O'Connell - General Secretary, Financial Services Union

Brian McDowell - Head of Communications & Public Affairs, Financial Services Union

The Financial Services Union briefed the Committee on the financial landscape in the UK and Ireland.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the future of banking and banking hubs.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask the Financial Services Union to provide a copy of the banking forum report on the future of banking.

The representatives left the meeting at 4.12pm.

## **8. Banking Hubs in Northern Ireland – Oral Briefing from Cash Access UK**

The following representative joined the meeting via Zoom at 4:13pm

Cat Farrow - Customer and Strategy Director Cash Access UK

Cash Access UK briefed the Committee on banking hubs and the work carried out by Cash Access UK.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the Banking Hubs in Kilkeel, Warrenpoint and Portrush which have opened, and those in Newcastle and Comber which are scheduled to open.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to issue a press release following the Committee's meeting with Cash Access UK.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to the Chairperson's proposal undertake a formal 'inquiry' into aspects of banking and financial services locally and to issue a further press release to this effect.

The officials left the meeting at 4.32pm.

## **9. Outturn and Forecast Outturn Data August 2024-25 – Departmental Written Briefing**

The Committee considered a written paper from the Department regarding the Outturn and Forecast Outturn Data for August 2024-25. This paper was brought back to today's meeting to allow the Deputy Chair to make comment.

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

## 10. Correspondence

i. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Communities to the Department of Finance following correspondence from an individual regarding property management companies.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to include a report from the Northern Ireland Law Commission on apartments in next week's meeting pack for Members consideration.

ii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Justice regarding the Budget update and the October Monitoring Round from Department of Justice officials.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider this correspondence as part of its oral briefing on the Budget Update with Departmental officials on the 6<sup>th</sup> of November.

iii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Justice in relation to an SL1 from the Department of Justice stating its intention to propose a Statutory Rule which will be brought with the concurrence of the Department of Finance which makes Rules to give effect to the Payment and Electronic Money Institution Insolvency Regulations 2021 (the 2021 Regulations).

iv. The Committee noted the Youth Assembly update for September 2024.

## 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:

- 1.30pm start for next week's meeting to accommodate the Effective Questioning Training Session.
- The Federation of Small Businesses and Consumer Council confirmed for 6<sup>th</sup> November meeting.
- Strategic Planning session will now take place at the Stormont Hotel on 13<sup>th</sup> November.



- DoF update on Memorandum of Reply to the Public Accounts Committee report on Broadband Investment in Northern Ireland to be considered at a December meeting.

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

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek an update from the Department on the NICS Office Rationalisation Programme, with specifics on any recent sales.

A number of Members raised concerns that no briefing date has been schedule the Interim Public Sector Transformation Board which was due to be scheduled for 23<sup>rd</sup> October.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to press for a date to be considered at the Committee's next meeting.

## **12. Any Other Business**

The Deputy Chairperson updated the Committee that the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) President, will be visiting Parliament Buildings on Monday 14<sup>th</sup> October.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that Members would meet with them if available on that date.

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

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 16 October 2024 at 1:30pm Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:52pm.

**Matthew O'Toole MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for Finance**

**16 October 2024**