



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

12 February 2025

Meeting Location: Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Matthew O'Toole MLA (Chairperson)
Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Phillip Brett MLA
Paul Frew MLA
Steve Aiken MLA
Jemma Dolan MLA
Deirdre Hargey MLA

Online: Eóin Tennyson 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 1:10pm in public session.

1. Apologies

None.

2. Declaration of Interests

Steve Aiken declared an interest as he represents members of the Prison Service under item 5.4 under Matter's Arising.

Deputy Chair declared an interest as a member of the Public Accounts Committee under item 5.4 under Matter's Arising.

Phillip Brett joined the meeting at 1.12pm.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson welcomed Jemma Dolan to the Committee.

The Chairperson welcomed three individuals who are at the Assembly today undertaking work experience.

3.1 Minister of Finance - Urgent WMS Response to Storm Éowyn and other pressures

The Chairperson discussed the written statement made by the Finance Minister in relation to Storm Éowyn and other pressures. The Minister has indicated that an adjustment to the Barnett consequential has resulted in the Executive receiving an additional £17.1 million Resource DEL and a reduction in Capital DEL of £3.5 million. Tables of the Funding Pressures identified by Departments, Allocations and

Departmental Outcomes have also been provided. The statement was also emailed to Members on Thursday 6 February.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department for further detail on how the additional £17.1million resource arose as a 'Consequential'; as well as whether bids that were not met in the January Monitoring Round were prioritised in this allocation; various queries around the substance of Storm Éowyn-related allocations; and whether the allocations are ring-fenced.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to ask the Department for a breakdown of the allocations, as well as details on issues relating to insurance covering damage; as well as information on the Translink "loss of business", based on actual figures.

3.2 New Minister for Finance - Introductory Meeting

The Chairperson discussed correspondence received from the new Finance Minister who wrote to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson suggesting an introductory meeting following the change in Minister.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that an introductory meeting between the Minister and Chair and Deputy Chair should be pursued to discuss a future appearance briefing from the Minister.

3.3 UK Finance Correspondence - Banking and Financial Services Landscape Inquiry

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into closed session at 1.21pm to discuss this item of correspondence.

The Committee moved into open session at 1.39pm.

Members expressed their views in relation to the importance of hearing from local banks directly as part of the Committee's inquiry. `

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to UK Finance indicating that Members are disappointed to receive his email and that the Committee would reissue an invitation to the banks with a presence in Northern Ireland to express the Committee's view to hear from them directly on the functioning of the banking system and fact find as part of its inquiry. The Committee accepted UK Finance's offer to provide evidence to the Inquiry.

Agreed: The Committee agreed as part of their invitations to the four banks to offer them whatever their preference would be logistically in terms of giving evidence to the Committee, with Members agreeing that the engagement will be positive, honest and sincere.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that if the banks do not accept the invitation to give oral evidence, a subsequent letter will issue seeking answers to specific questions relating to the Inquiry.

4. Draft Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of the 5 February 2025.

5. Matters Arising

5.1 Secretary of State for Northern Ireland - Executive Restoration Package settlement

The Committee noted correspondence from the Secretary of State (SoS) for Northern Ireland regarding the Executive Restoration Package settlement, specifically the Public Sector Transformation Board (PSTB) and the SoS NI's role in relation to this. The Committee previously wrote to the SoS in relation to briefing around the PSTB. The SoS has indicated that he remains of the view that this would not be appropriate. This was discussed at last week's meeting and Members agreed to bring it back this week to allow for further discussion.

Members also considered press releases and news articles detailing the Welsh Secretary's appearance in front of the Senedd's Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee in November 2024, and the Secretary of State for Scotland attendance at the Scottish Economy and Fair Work Committee on the 15th January 2025. Members also considered hard copy guidance regarding attendance of UK Government Ministers and their officials at Committees in devolved legislatures.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write again to the SoS noting the precedents his cabinet colleagues at the Scotland and Wales offices have set and the guidance provided to Ministers and seeking commentary on why the Committee's request

differs from those of the Scottish and Welsh committees and to again, invite the NIO Permanent Secretary, Julie Harrison, who sits on the PSTB, to bring the Committee with other Members of the Board.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request an oral update on the work of the PTSB from the Board's members, including Julie Harrison.

5.2 Northern Ireland Affairs Committee - Use of SLAPPs in Northern Ireland

The Committee noted correspondence from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC) in relation to the use of SLAPPs in Northern Ireland and options for legislative reform in this area. Given the DoF's responsibility for the Defamation Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and the review published last year, NIAC have wished to highlight to the Committee the transcript of their meeting and the evidence they took on this issue.

The Chairperson declared an interest as Chair of the All Party Group on Press Freedoms and Media Sustainability.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance to request an update in relation to SLAPP actions from the Taskforce.

Deirdre Hargey joined the meeting at 1.57pm.

5.3 Department of Finance - Treasury Funding to cover the rise in Employer's National Insurance Contribution query

The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee Clerk to the Department regarding Treasury Funding to cover the rise in Employer's National Insurance Contribution (NIC). The Department have indicated that the announcement referred to changes to Local Government Finance Settlements for 2025-26 and is not a change to Whitehall department's budgets and, therefore, the Executive will not receive additional Barnett consequentials as a result. The Department also indicated that the Executive will receive Barnett consequentials on any additional funding provided to Whitehall departments and the Treasury has not confirmed the amount the Executive will receive.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department for urgent clarity in the form of a table which sets out the cash impact on costs in terms of additional costs due to

the Employers' National Insurance Contributions increase across the NICS, ALB's, local councils and any other public bodies for which it has figures. The Committee stressed how this table should reflect what the Department has asked for from the Treasury.

5.4 Department of Finance - NICS Sickness Absence

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to NICS sickness absence. Members previously agreed to seek an update from the Department at its meeting on the 27 January following correspondence regarding NICS Sickness Absence 23/24 and HR Related matters.

The Department has responded outlining measures that have already been adopted including other actions planned, or underway. The Department has also provided an overview of NICS sick absence for the year 23/24.

Paul Frew left the meeting at 4.31pm and returned at 4.32pm.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 4.38pm and returned at 4.44pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the additional information to other statutory Committees to support their scrutiny of individual departments, which are responsible for the application of NICSHR policy and management with regard to their own staff – this is not the responsibility of DoF.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to NISRA to confirm whether they believe the statistics provided in the 23/24 report regarding the NICS and civil services in other jurisdictions are comparable.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request an oral briefing from the Department on the sickness absence policy review and wider policy development in this area.

5.5 NI Open Government Network - Follow-up information

The Committee noted correspondence from NI Open Government Network regarding follow up information following their oral briefing to the Committee on the 4 December 2024.

A number of follow-up issues were requested and a response was considered at its meeting on 22 January. At that time the Department of Justice and Health has not

proactively published statistics for 2023. Following their publication Open Government Network have sent revised information on FoI performances.

Agreed: The Committee noted the additional information provided and agreed to forward it to other statutory Committees for their consideration and to support their scrutiny.

5.6 Primary Legislation Table

The Committee noted the Primary Legislation Table. At last week's meeting Members agreed to ask for an update in relation to Primary Legislation expected from the Department. The table contains the most up to date position from the Department and the Committee have asked for this to be returned to Committee by the end of February with any updates.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department to update the RAG status on the table and to provide an urgent update on the Deaths and Still Births Registration Bill, specifically whether this has been seen and approved by the Executive.

5.7 Committee for the Economy - Correspondence to the Department of Finance regarding Investment Activity Reports City & Growth Deals

The Committee noted correspondence to the Department from the Committee for the Economy in relation to incorporating capital projects from the City & Growth Deals into the Investment Activity Report. That committee has sought an update following a review of the Report. The Committee has been copied in for information.

The Committee for Finance has also previously corresponded on the issue, supporting the stance of the Economy Committee.

6. SR 21/2025 - The Rates (Small Business Hereditament Relief) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Rule has now been formally laid before the Assembly and is subject to negative resolution procedure however the Examiner of Statutory Rules has not yet reported on the rule.

Agreed: The Committee for Finance noted SR 2025 No. 21 the Rates (Small Business Hereditament Relief) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

7. Capital Investment Fund for the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector - Oral Briefing from Development Trusts NI

Agreed: Members agreed that the briefing should be reported by Hansard.

The following officials joined the meeting at 2.16pm;

Charlie Fisher, CEO Development Trusts NI

Margaret Craig, Programmes Manager Development Trusts NI

The officials briefed the Committee on the Capital Investment Fund for the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the case for the introduction of a Northern Ireland Community Ownership and Wealth Building Fund.

The Chairperson declared an interest as having issued correspondence on behalf of Development Trusts NI.

The Deputy Chairperson declared an interest with the work of Development Trusts NI in her constituency.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 2.37pm.

The officials left the meeting at 2.56pm.

Agreed: Following the receipt of information, the Committee agreed to request an oral briefing from the Finance Innovation Lab as part of the Committee's Inquiry into the Banking and Financial Services Landscape.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to follow up with Development Trusts NI subsequent to their meeting with Minister for Finance on the 3rd March, with DTNI to supply further information on the use FTC.

8. Budget Bill and SSE's - Oral Briefing from Department of Finance.

Agreed: Members agreed that the briefing should be reported by Hansard.

The following officials joined the meeting at 2:59pm;

Patrick Neeson - Assistant Secretary, Public Spending Directorate

Angela Ross - Supply Officer, Public Spending Directorate

The officials briefed the Committee on the draft Budget Bill and SSE's.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including functions to be authorised under Sole Authority of the Budget Bill and Vote on Account.

Phillip Brett returned to the meeting at 3.12pm.

Jemma Dolan left the meeting at 3.41pm and returned at 3.46pm.

The officials left the meeting at 3.52pm

The Committee agreed by consensus to support accelerated passage. Gerry Carroll put on record that he does not support accelerated passage.

Agreed: The Committee for Finance is content that there has been “appropriate consultation” with the Committee, as per Standing Order 42(2), in respect of the public expenditure proposals covered in the Budget Bill 2025 and is, therefore, willing to grant the requested Accelerated Passage for the Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Speaker and the Minister with Members’ decision in respect of granting Accelerated Passage for the Budget Bill 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to provide further detail on what information departments were asked for in regards to additional bids, to provide the most current quarterly update regarding expenditure resting on the Sole Authority of the Budget Act table and information on how the Utility Regulator is funded.

9. RalSe Oral Briefing - Rates Reform and Comparability

The following officials joined the meeting at 3:57pm;

Karen Clarke Researcher, RalSe

Deirdre Hargey left the meeting at 3.57pm.

Jemma Dolan left the meeting at 3.58pm and returned at 3.59pm.

The officials briefed the Committee on rates reform and comparability.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the domestic and non-domestic rating systems across the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland.

Steve Aiken left the meeting at 4.19pm and returned at 4.22pm.

The officials left the meeting at 4.23pm.

10.LCM - Property (Digital Assets etc.) Bill - Consideration of Committee Report

Agreed: Members agreed that the briefing should be reported by Hansard.

The Committee considered the Legislative Consent Memorandum on the Property (Digital Assets etc.) Bill, which was laid in the Business Office on the 10 February 2025.

The Committee also considered two stakeholder responses from the Law Society and the Federation of Small Businesses.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Department of Finance's proposal to extend the provisions in the Property (Digital Assets etc.) Bill to Northern Ireland by way of a Legislative Consent Motion.

The Committee considered a draft report on the Legislative Consent Memorandum for the provisions in the Property (Digital Assets etc.) Bill to be extended to Northern Ireland and the Legislative Consent Motion to be brought forward by the Minister of Finance. The Committee's consideration was as follows:

Title Page, Contents Page and Committee Membership and Powers Page

The Committee considered the Title Page, Contents Page and Committee Membership and Powers Page as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Title Page, Contents Page and Committee Membership and Powers Page.

Background

The Committee considered the Background section of the report as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Background section of the report.

Purpose of the Legislative Consent Motion

The Committee considered the Purpose of the Legislative Consent Motion section of the report as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Purpose of the Legislative Consent Motion section of the report as drafted.

Committee Consideration of the Legislative Consent Motion

The Committee considered the Committee Consideration of the Legislative Consent Motion section of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Committee Consideration of the Legislative Consent Motion section of the report as drafted.

Conclusion

The Committee considered the Conclusion section of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Conclusion section of the report as drafted.

Appendices

The Committee considered the Appendices section of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content that the Appendices be included in the report as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the minutes of this meeting (12 February) to be added to Appendix 2 when agreed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Report on LCM - Property (Digital Assets etc.) Bill Legislative Consent Memorandum to be published and issued to all Members.

11. Correspondence

- i. The Committee noted a correspondence from the Public Accounts Committee on Post-Primacy Scrutiny. This is intended to provide clarity on the respective roles of the PAC, C&AG and Statutory Committees in operation of the Primacy convention.
- ii. The Committee noted a Hansard transcript for the oral briefing on the 29 January from NICVA on the NI Banking Inquiry.
- i. The Committee noted the 31st Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules. There are no rules for the attention of this Committee.

12. 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:

- The following Departmental Briefings have been confirmed; Northern Ireland Investment Fund 5 March, Contingent liabilities 5 March and Disposal of Assets will take place on the 12 March.
- Next week's meeting on the 19 February will begin at 1pm.
- The Minister has confirmed his attendance to Interparliamentary Finance Committee Forum on the 19 March.

Philipp Brett raised a query as to whether the new Finance Minister is set to provide oral evidence to the Committee. The Clerk informed the Member that an oral evidence session will be scheduled in due course following an introductory meeting between the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson.

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

13. Any Other Business

Gerry Carroll wanted to put on record his concerns regarding Members being free to ask questions without restriction. The Chair assured him that it is his practice to allow Members as much latitude to ask questions as possible, while remaining within the remit of the Committee and not creating excessive additional work for Committee staff.

Steve Aiken raised his concerns with regard to an appearance of the Head of the Civil Service, Dr Jayne Brady and DoF Permanent Secretary Neil Gibson at a recent meeting of the Public Accounts Committee Major Capital Projects and the response to the recommendations from the RHI Inquiry were. The Committee discussed its anticipated pursuit of these issues following the completion of the PAC's work on them and the end of that Committee's primacy.

The Chairperson raised a concern regarding a response he received in an answer to a written question on the regional rates increase for 2025-2026 (AGW 22186/22-27) and when it would be agreed by the Executive. The Executive has agreed the increase, however, the Committee was not informed.

14. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 19 February 2025 at 1:00pm in the Senate Chamber Parliament Buildings,

The meeting was adjourned at 5.09pm.

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

12 February 2025