



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

12 March 2025

Meeting Location: Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Steve Aiken MLA

Phillip Brett MLA

Paul Frew MLA

Online: Gerry Carroll MLA

Jemma Dolan MLA

Deirdre Hargey MLA

Apologies: Matthew O'Toole MLA (Chairperson)

Eóin Tennyson MLA

In Attendance: Peter Hall Committee Clerk

Clairita Frazer Assistant Assembly Clerk

Stephen Magee Clerical Supervisor

Heather Graham Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 1:16pm in public session with the Deputy Chairperson, Diane Forsythe assuming the Chair.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Lay Observer Annual Report April 2023-March 2024 & Legal Services Oversight Commissioner

Members considered an update on subordinate legislation required to enact all the powers for a Legal Services Oversight Commissioner.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to obtain a confirmed timescale for the required subordinate legislation and to schedule an oral briefing on same.

3.2 C&AG Disclaiming of Department for the Economy Accounts for 2023-24

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

Steve Aiken declared an interest as a former Chief Executive.

The Committee considered a news article highlighting the C&AG's opinion on the annual accounts for the Department for the Economy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request clarification from the Department of Finance as to whether or not it was aware of the situation and at what point, as well

as its view on the unusual step that the C&AG has taken; and to seek the Department's reassurance that this issue has been appropriately managed and will not impact on the Block Grant. Members also agreed to consider holding a concurrent meeting with the Committee for the Economy when the Public Accounts Committee had relinquished primacy in relation to the issue.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to convene an informal roundtable with Finance Directors within all Departments to gain some insight into the job that they do.

4. Draft Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of the 12 March 2025.

5. Matters Arising

5.1 Department of Finance – Final Budget 2025-25.

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Finance to all Departments seeking further information to inform proposals on a final Budget 2025-26.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to copy the correspondence to all other Statutory Committees and to the Assembly Audit Committee for their information.

5.2 Returns from Statutory Committees – 2025-26 draft Budgets

The Committee noted a return from the Committee for Communities in relation to briefing on the 2025-26 draft Budget. Members noted previous agreement to publish all such responses on the Finance Committee webpages when all returns were received from Statutory Committees.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for Communities highlighting issues raised by a Member, asking for clarification on funding for housing adaptations, new build housing and alternative funding models for the Housing Investment Strategy referenced in that Committee's return.

5.3 Construction Employers Federation

The Committee noted a copy of a submission from the Construction Employers Federation (CEF) on the draft NI Executive Budget for 2025-26.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to copy the submission to the Committee for Infrastructure and to publish it on the Committee for Finance webpages. In respect of funding for NI Water, the Committee also agreed to seek clarification from the Department of Finance on its view of the figures quoted by CEF compared to comments made by the Minister of Finance during Question Time on Tuesday 11th March 2025.

5.4 Committee for Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs– NICS Sickness absence

The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs regarding NICS Sickness absence.

5.5 & 5.6 Department of Business & Trade – Transformation Plan

The Committee noted a response from the RT Hon Jonathan Reynolds MP, Secretary of State for Business & Trade regarding the Post Office Transformation plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to copy the response to Retail NI.

5.7 DALO Readout extract of requests made following 19 February meeting

The Committee noted an extract of the DALO readout table detailing requests made following the meeting held on 19th February 2025. Members also noted that responses in relation to Fujitsu Contracts etc. and the Procurement Board were outstanding and would follow at a later date.

5.8 DALO Readout response – NI Executive Restoration Financial Package (Inc. Fiscal Framework)

The Committee noted an update provided in relation to the Budget Sustainability Plans, forecasts of income generation, ISNI and Transformation Funding.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note this update pending a scheduled oral briefing on the Interim Fiscal Framework on 14th May 2025.

5.9 DALO Readout response – National Insurance Costs

The Committee noted confirmation that Barnett consequentials would not be confirmed until the Westminster Main Estimates in June and that it would be for individual Ministers to prioritise and manage their budgets to ensure that they live within their allocations.

5.10 DALO Readout response – Revised Department of Finance (DoF) Delegate Limits

The Committee noted previous Delegate Limits as outlined in Dear Accounting Officer (DAO) 8/21.

5.11 DALO Readout response – Land & Property Services (LPS) - Trust

Statement: Rate Levy Accruals Account, Annual Report and Accounts 2023-2024

The Committee considered an update in relation to Rate Collection targets and performance comparisons.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department of Finance for specific information on comparison of LPS target setting for Rate Collection with GB local authorities.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that where possible detailed responses and papers from the Department of Finance would be provided for Members in main meeting packs as opposed to tabled packs. Exceptions to this would be timebound or urgent matters.

5.12 DALO Readout response – Civil Service Pay Award 2024

The Committee noted information from the Department of Finance relating to the timeframe for awarding the Civil Service Pay Award for 2024.

5.13 DALO Readout response – Public Sector Transformation Board

The Committee considered information from the Department of Finance detailing the timeline of engagement and correspondence between the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Minister of Finance in relation to the Terms of Reference for the Interim Public Sector Transformation Board, drawdown of funding and agreement of spending.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a copy of the agreed Terms of Reference to the Public Sector Transformation Board.

5.14 DALO Readout response – Special European Union Programme Board (SEUPB) Accounts

The Committee noted an update from the Department of Finance regarding the timeline for the SEUPB Accounts for 2024.

5.15 DALO Readout response – Departmental Equality Impacts

The Committee noted an update from the Department of Finance regarding returns from all Departments on equality impacts of the draft Budget 2024/25.

5.16 DALO Readout response – SL1 – Valuation

The Committee noted that the LPS neither holds additional information in respect of, nor has any role in the licensing of, Telecommunications operators which is a matter for the Department for Economy and Ofcom NI.

5.17 DALO Readout response – DoF Budget 25-26

The Committee considered detail provided by the Department of Finance in relation to its capital budget, Estate Strategy, NOVA Programme and Vote on Account provision.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to circulate the NICS Estate Strategy in advance of the oral briefing on Disposal of Assets later in today's meeting.

6. SL1 – The Public Service Pensions Revaluation Order (NI) 2025

Steve Aiken declared an interest as the Chairman of the NI Assembly Pension Scheme.

The Committee considered a proposal by the Department to specify the change in the general level of prices or earnings used by career average revalued earnings (CARE) public service pension schemes for the purpose of revaluing active members' pension benefits.

The Statutory Rule will be subject to the negative resolution procedure before the Assembly.

Agreed: The Committee for Finance agreed that it was content with the proposed Statutory Rule to specify the change in the general level of prices or earnings used by career average revalued earnings (CARE) public service pension schemes for the purpose of revaluing active members' pension benefits.

7. Disposal of Assets – Oral Briefing by the Department of Finance

The following officials joined the meeting at 1.52pm;

Desi McDonnell	Construction & Procurement Delivery (CPD), Director of Properties Division;
Niall Hobbs	CPD, Deputy Director of Properties Division;
Angela McGrath	Land & Property Services (LPS), Director of Valuation Services; and
Ursula Mayers	LPS, Central Advisory Unit.

The Committee noted a briefing note and relevant papers provided by the Department on recent disposals from the NICS Estate and associated matters.

The departmental officials briefed the Committee on the detail around the recent disposals.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

The Committee agreed to move into closed session at 2.06pm and moved back into public session at 2.09pm.

A number of issues were discussed including market value assessments, the NICS Office Estate Strategy and the witnessed random selection process used in the disposal of assets.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an update from the Department of Finance on the first review of the NICS Office Estate Strategy, when the Committee Work Programme permitted.

The Chairperson thanked the officials and they left the meeting at 2.19pm.

The Committee adjourned at 2.19pm and reconvened at 2.27pm.

Deirdre Hargey and Phillip Brett joined the meeting at 2.27pm.

8. Building Regulations – Written Briefing by the Department of Finance

The Committee noted that detailed papers for the scheduled written briefing from the Department of Finance on the work of the Task & Finish Group had only been sent to the Committee Office that morning and that they would be in meeting packs for the next scheduled meeting on 26th March 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule an oral briefing with Department of Finance officials at the meeting on 26th March to answer Members' questions in this regard.

9. Inquiry: NI Banking & Financial Services Landscape - Oral Briefing by National Federation of SubPostmasters

The Committee noted a written submission provided in advance from the National Federation of SubPostmasters. Members noted a Hansard transcript of an oral evidence session with Rural Community Network which would be added to the evidence base for Committee's Inquiry.

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the briefing paper and Hansard transcript of today's session would be published on the Committee's webpage for inclusion in the Committee's report.

The following witness joined the meeting at 2.30pm;

Jim McCafferty Non-Executive Director for Northern Ireland, National
Federation of SubPostmasters

The witness briefed the Committee on the Post Office network in respect of financial access, as part of the Committee's Inquiry into the Banking and Financial Services Landscape.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the extent of the Post Office Network, potential expansion, current services offered within post office settings and the Government's expected Green Paper on a New Deal for Postmasters; including required investment.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek additional detail on passport application transactions carried out by the Post Office Network.

The Chairperson thanked the witness and he left the meeting at 3.00pm.

10. Inquiry: NI Banking & Financial Services Landscape - Oral Briefing by Millisle & District Community Association

The Committee noted a submission provided in advance by Millisle & District Community Association and the “Community Access to Cash Pilots” Report.

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the briefing paper and Hansard transcript of today’s session would be published on the Committee’s webpage for inclusion in the Committee’s report.

The following witness joined the meeting at 3.00pm;

Bill Megraw Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Millisle & District Community Association

The witness briefed the Committee on the experience of Millisle & District Community Association in respect of financial access, as part of the Committee’s Inquiry into the Banking and Financial Services Landscape.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the Access to Cash Pilot and the importance of community and voluntary involvement.

The Chairperson thanked the witness and he left the meeting at 3.25pm.

11. Correspondence

- i. The Committee noted the Thirty fourth Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

12. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the Forward Work Programme, as drafted.

The Committee noted an update from the Clerk in relation to; the Interparliamentary Finance Committee Forum on 19th March, Visit and external Committee meeting in Kilkeel on 2nd April and oral briefings with Bank and Building Society representatives on 9th April.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the meeting on 26th March would start at the earlier time of 1pm to accommodate the anticipated business.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to amend the Forward Work Programme as necessary and schedule accordingly.

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

13. Any Other Business

Phillip Brett updated Members on the agreed action of the Economy Committee in respect of the C&AG's Disclaiming of the Department for the Economy Accounts for 2023-24.

14. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 26 March 2025 at 1:00pm in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 3.33pm.

Diane Forsythe MLA

Deputy Chairperson, Committee for Finance

26 March 2025