



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

26 March 2025

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Steve Aiken MLA

Gerry Carroll MLA

Paul Frew MLA

Eoin Tennyson MLA

Online: Jemma Dolan MLA

Deirdre Hargey MLA

Apologies: Matthew O'Toole MLA (Chairperson)

Phillip Brett MLA

In Attendance: Peter Hall Committee Clerk

Clairita Frazer Assistant Assembly Clerk

Tom Armstrong Assistant Assembly Clerk

Stephen Magee Clerical Supervisor

Heather Graham Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 1:08 pm in public session.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Deputy Chairperson placed on record the Committee's congratulations to the Chairperson on the recent birth of his daughter and passed on the best wishes of Members.

3.1 Minister of Finance – Deaths, Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill

The Chairperson informed Members that an advance copy of the Deaths, Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill and the accompanying Explanatory and Financial Memorandum had been received from the Minister of Finance. Members noted that the Bill had been introduced in the Assembly on Tuesday 25th March 2025 and that Second Stage of the Bill is scheduled for Monday 7th April 2025, following which the Bill is expected to be referred to the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee team would liaise with the Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer and Assembly Research to schedule briefings and research as appropriate. Members also agreed to obtain an update from the Department of Finance on planned consultation around the Bill provisions.

3.2 Balmoral Show

The Chairperson discussed correspondence regarding the 2025 Balmoral Show and opportunity for Assembly Committees' participation and public engagement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to cancel the scheduled Committee meeting on 14th May in order to utilise a slot within the Assembly's presence at the Balmoral Show. This could be an opportunity to engage and survey attendees in respect of the Committee's Inquiry into NI Banking and Financial Services Landscape or other relevant issues. Members asked the Clerk to draw up a potential programme for Committee activity on the day.

3.3 Interparliamentary Finance Committee Forum (IFCF)

The Chairperson noted that a joint communique following the IFCF had been finalised and circulated between the Committee Chairs for agreement. Members placed on record their thanks to the Committee team for organising a very successful event.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the joint communique would be published and that work would progress to finalise correspondence from the Forum to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and on a Legacy Report for the Forum.

3.4 Committee for Finance & Committee for the Economy – NI Assembly Budget Event 29 January 2025

The Chairperson discussed the publication of the Committee Report on the Joint Event with the Committee for the Economy regarding the Chancellor's Autumn Statement which took place on 29 January 2025, and the related Assembly debate.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the report would be published on the Committee's webpage and delivered to all MLAs in advance of the Assembly debate on Tuesday 8th April 2025. Members also agreed to circulate the report to all those who attended the Event.

3.5 Finance: Inter-Ministerial Standing Committee (F:ISC)

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department of Finance for a readout of discussions and agreements reached at the recent F:ISC meeting in Cardiff.

Members also agreed to request updates from the Department on future F:ISC meetings. Finally, the Committee agreed that this could be an issue to discuss with the Minister of Finance at the oral briefing scheduled for 7th May 2025.

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 Minister of Finance – Summary Report on key issues in the NI Banking Sector

The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Finance providing a Summary Report on key issues in the NI Banking Sector, following the Minister's roundtable event in November 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to include the summary report in its Inquiry report on the NI Banking and Financial Services Landscape.

5.2 Communities Minister – Written Ministerial Statement - Funding for Co-Ownership

The Committee noted a Written Ministerial Statement made the Minister for Communities announcing a loan of Financial Transactions Capital funding for Co-Ownership Housing Association.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department of Communities if the initiative announced by the Minister to purchase up to 600 homes over the next three

years to use as Temporary Accommodation had been facilitated through Financial Transactions Capital.

5.3 Department of Finance – Procurement Policy Note and Press Release

The Committee noted that the Executive had approved revisions to the Procurement Policy Note 04/21 (Procurement Control Limits), to take account of the significant increase in inflation over the last 5 years and the impact on the processes required for low value procurement competitions.

5.4 Department of Finance – NI Fiscal Council Update on Member Appointments

The Committee noted an update from the Department of Finance on the membership of the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council.

Gerry Carroll joined the meeting at 1.26pm.

5.5 Department of Finance - Response to Agriculture Committee re NICS sickness Absence

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance to the Agriculture Committee regarding NICS Sickness absence. Members noted that this issue would be revisited by this Committee in the future.

5.6 Returns from Statutory Committees – 2025-26 draft Executive Budget

The Committee noted a return from the Committee for Education in relation to briefing on the 2025-26 draft Executive Budget. Members noted a previous agreement to publish all such responses on the Finance Committee webpages when all returns were received from Statutory Committees and that this latest response would be added to the Committee's compilation report on the 2025-26 draft Budget.

5.7 Public Accounts Committee – Primacy on Reports

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

The Committee noted correspondence from the Public Accounts Committee notifying Statutory Committees of its decision to retain ‘Primacy’ on the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report into Ambulance Handovers in Northern Ireland published on 11 March 2025 and agreement to release the NIAO report into Tackling Waiting Lists published in October 2023.

5.8 The Executive Office Committee – Primacy on Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Report

The Chairperson discussed correspondence from the Committee for the Executive Office seeking the Committee for Finance’s plans in relation to the Northern Ireland Audit Office reports on the Northern Ireland Non-Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive scheme, which have been released by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to inform the Committee for the Executive Office that this Committee had agreed to keep a watching briefing on the implementation of recommendations and anticipates launching a piece of work on this in the Autumn.

5.9 Banking Inquiry – Response from the National Association of Sub-postmasters

The Committee noted a response from the National Association of Sub-postmasters providing information on the number of passport applications (Irish & UK) currently accepted at PO counters in Northern Ireland.

Eoin Tennyson joined the meeting at 1.32pm.

5.10 News Story – Anger as ATM runs out of Cash

The Committee noted a copy of a newspaper article highlighting the issue of access to cash in rural towns in Scotland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the article to the Committee’s evidence base for the Committee’s Inquiry into NI Banking and Financial Services Landscape. Members also agreed to write to Retail NI to ask about the prevalence of this issue, following which the Committee may decide to raise this issue with LINK.

5.11 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.

5.12 DALO Readout Response – Fujitsu etc. Contracts

The Committee considered a response from the Department on how the Cabinet Office work feeds through to the Department of Finance, on officials’ engagement with the Cabinet Crown Commercial Representatives in Cabinet Office and detail of “One Government” meetings and outputs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to keep a watching brief on this issue.

5.13 DALO Readout Response – Procurement Board

The Committee noted an update on the current status of the Procurement Board.

5.14 DALO Readout extract of requests made following 26 February meeting

The Committee noted an extract of the DALO readout table detailing requests made following the meeting held on 26th February 2025.

5.15 DALO Readout Response – Budget 2025-26

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding the status of the Budget for 2025/26, pending an oral briefing from Departmental officials.

5.16 DALO Readout Response – SEUPB Accounts 2023

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding prompt payment figures set out in the SEUPB Accounts for 2023.

5.17 DALO Readout extract of requests made following 5th March meeting

The Committee noted an extract of the DALO readout table detailing requests made following the meeting held on 5th March 2025.

5.18 DALO Readout Response – Public Sector Transformation Board

The Committee considered a response from the Department regarding Transformation Funding.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to delay an oral briefing from the Public Sector Transformation Board as a result of workload created by the Committee's current workstreams including anticipated scrutiny of the Deaths, Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill.

5.19 DALO Readout Response – Public Accounts Committee Reports - RHI recommendations

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding the next 6-monthly update on the RHI recommendations which highlights that the monitoring exercise will commence in August and that an update would be provided to the Committee in September.

5.20 DALO Readout Response- Capital Easements

The Committee considered a response from the Department regarding the implications of a delay in the delivery of small construction works projects due to an ongoing legal challenge.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request that the Department keeps it fully informed as to the status of the legal challenge.

5.21 DALO Readout Response- NI Investment Fund

Steven Aiken declared an interest and indicated that he would not be commenting on this item.

The Committee considered a response from the Department regarding the Northern Ireland Investment Fund and membership of its Scrutiny Board.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider an informal briefing from members of the Scrutiny Board.

6. SL1 - The Pensions Increase (Review) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025 – Oral Briefing from Departmental officials

The Committee noted a proposal by the Department for a statutory rule to make provision for the annual increase of official pensions Public service pensions in payment and deferred pensions which are reviewed in April each year to take account of change in the cost of living.

Members noted that the proposed Statutory Rule is not be subject to any Assembly procedure and will come into operation on 7 April 2025.

7. Draft SR 2025/0000 The Recognition of Professional Qualifications and Implementation of International Recognition Agreements (Amendment) (Extension to Switzerland etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee noted that the Department has formally laid a draft statutory rule which will implement provisions in “the agreement” between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Swiss Confederation on Recognition of Professional Qualifications - insofar as they relate to the legal profession in Northern Ireland. Members noted that this SR replaced previously laid SR2025/10 to correct a technical error in the procedure used to lay and make the Rule.

The rule will be subject to draft affirmative resolution procedure and will come into operation after it is debated and affirmed in the Assembly. Members noted that the debate on the rule was scheduled to take place on Monday 31st March 2025.

The Committee noted that in her 35th Report, the Examiner of Statutory Rules did not draw this rule to the attention of the Assembly.

Agreed: The Committee considered Draft SR 2025/0000 The Recognition of Professional Qualifications and Implementation of International Recognition Agreements (Amendment) (Extension to Switzerland etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and recommended that it be approved by the Assembly.

8. SR 2025/43 The Rates (Social Sector Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee noted that the Department has formally laid a draft statutory rule which will amend the 2007 Rates (Social Value) Regulations to update the list of Housing Associations currently listed.

The SR is subject to the negative resolution procedure and the end of the statutory period has been calculated as 28 April 2025. The Rule will come into operation on 1st April 2025.

The Committee noted that in her 35th Report, the Examiner of Statutory Rules did not draw this rule to the attention of the Assembly.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2025/43 The Rates (Social Sector Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule

9. SR 2025/44 The Valuation (Telecommunications, Natural Gas and Water) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee noted that the Department has formally laid a statutory rule which will amend the Valuation (Telecommunications, Natural Gas and Water) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010.

The SR is subject to the negative resolution procedure and the end of the statutory period has been calculated as 28 April 2025. It will come into operation on 1st April 2025.

The Committee noted that in her 35th Report, the Examiner of Statutory Rules did not draw this rule to the attention of the Assembly.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy to seek information on the process used by itself and Ofcom NI to licence such companies operating in these areas.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2025/44 The Valuation (Telecommunications, Natural Gas and Water) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule.

10. SR 2025/50 The Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 (Estimates and Accounts) (Designation of Bodies) Order 2025

The Committee noted that the Department has formally laid a statutory rule which will amend the Government Resources and Accounts (Northern Ireland) Act 2001 (Estimates and Accounts) (Designation of Bodies) Order 2025, which designates specified central government bodies in relation to named government departments for

the purpose of those departments' supply estimates and resource accounts. Members also noted that the SR had been amended to correct a typographical error within a heading in the original rule laid.

The proposed rule will be subject to negative resolution procedure before the Assembly and the end of the statutory period is 5 May 2025. It will come into operation on 1st April 2025.

The Committee noted that in her 35th Report, the Examiner of Statutory Rules did not draw this rule to the attention of the Assembly.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2025/50 The Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 (Estimates and Accounts) (Designation of Bodies) Order 2025 and has no objection to the Rule.

11. SR 2025/55 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation Order (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee noted that the Department has formally laid a statutory rule which will specify the annual percentage 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 is subject to the negative resolution procedure and the end of the statutory period has been calculated as 5 May 2025. It will come into operation on 1st April 2025.

The Committee noted that in her 35th Report, the Examiner of Statutory Rules did not draw this rule to the attention of the Assembly.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2025/55 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation Order (Northern Ireland) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule.

12. Shared Property Management – Oral briefing on scoping work by Department of Finance

The following officials joined the meeting at 2.06pm

Michael Foster Head of Civil Law Reform; and

Catherine Nixon Principal Legal Officer, Civil Law Reform.

The officials briefed the Committee on the scoping work carried out by the Department of Finance regarding scoping work and research carried out in respect of Shared Property Management. The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including differences between property management companies and agents, property management fees, service charges, resourcing for potential legislative change and responsibility for unadopted developments.

The deputy Chairperson thanked the officials and they left the meeting at 2.34pm

13. Budget 2025/26 – Oral Briefing from Departmental Officials

Agreed: Members agreed that the scheduled oral briefing would be deferred to a later meeting.

The Committee noted that a short compilation report on the draft Executive Budget 2025/26 and related motion for Assembly debate had been drafted to reflect the Committee's approach towards scrutiny of the draft Executive Budget for 2025-26.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into closed session to consider the draft Committee Report on the draft Executive Budget for 2025-26

The Committee moved into closed session at 2.40pm.

Members noted that any typographical or formatting errors in the report would be amended at final proofing stage.

Title Page, Contents Page and Committee Powers and Membership Page

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

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

Introduction Section

The Committee considered the Introduction Section of the report (paragraphs 1-8) as drafted. Members discussed an amendment to paragraph 2 of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Introduction Section of the report, as amended.

Committee Approach Section

The Committee considered the Committee Approach section of the report (paragraphs 9-15) as drafted. Members noted that the date of the final departmental briefing would be amended to reflect a change to the date of a scheduled briefing with the Department of Finance.

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

Appendices

The Committee considered the Appendices section of the report and noted that these would be updated following today's meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content that the Appendices be included in the report as amended following today's meeting.

Motion

The Committee considered the draft Motion which would be debated following formal presentation of the report in the Assembly Business Office.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the following motion for plenary debate;

“That this Assembly notes the Committee for Finance and Northern Ireland Fiscal Council reports on the 2025-26 draft Budget and calls on the Minister of Finance to give due regard to their findings.”

The Committee returned to public session at 2.46pm.

The Committee noted that the 4th report of the Committee for Finance had been agreed which would be reflected in the minutes of proceedings.

14. Building Regulations - T&F Group update on Departmental fit – Oral Briefing from Departmental officials

The following officials joined the meeting at 2.47pm

Sharon Smyth	Deputy Secretary, Construction & Procurement Delivery (CPD);
John Burke	Deputy Director, Building Standards Branch, Properties Division, CPD;
Billy Black	Principal Professional and Technical Officer, Building Standards Branch, Properties Division, CPD (attending virtually); and
Damian Fairley	Senior Professional and Technical Officer, Building Standards Branch, Properties Division, CPD.

The officials briefed the Committee on the work of the Task & Finish Group and work of the Building Regulations Team in the Department of Finance going forward. The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including ultimate responsibility for the recommendations made by the Task & Finish Group, the timeline and resourcing for the transfer of responsibility and staff to the Department for Communities as well as sustainability and future proofing for building safety.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request that the Department of Finance keeps the Committee informed of developments in this area.

Gerry Carroll left the meeting at 3.01pm.

The Chairperson thanked the officials and they left the meeting at 3.03pm

15. Outturn and Forecast Outturn – Written Briefing from Departmental officials

The Committee considered a written briefing from the Department of Finance on the February Outturn and Forecast Outturn data.

Members noted that there was no indication of any overspend within the Department for Infrastructure with respect to NI Water, and that there were considerable variations between January and February data from the Department of the Economy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Finance for a view on the issues highlighted within the respect to the Department for Infrastructure and Department for the Economy and for information on what work is being progressed by the Department of Finance in this regard. Additionally, the Committee agreed to seek clarification on the registration of risks with respect to these issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to copy the Outturn and Forecast Outturn data to other Statutory Committees and the Assembly Audit Committee for their information.

Members also noted that the Department of Finance had commissioned the 2024-25 Provisional Outturn exercise and that returns from Departments were due on 14th May 2025.

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

16. Wealth-building Measures – Oral Briefing from Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe)

The following Assembly official joined the meeting at 3.20pm;

Nathan Mulholland Research Officer, RaISe

The official briefed the Committee on wealth-building measures in Northern Ireland. The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

Gerry Carroll returned to the meeting at 3.27pm.

The official left the meeting at 3.35pm.

17. Correspondence

i. The Committee noted copy correspondence from Lord Carlile of Berriew, Chair of the NI Scrutiny Committee to the SoS for NI regarding the Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee discussions on the ongoing transitional introduction of the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and its potential implications for Northern Ireland.

ii. The Committee noted correspondence from an individual regarding a complaint about access to the Government Gateway.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to inform the individual that the Committee does not pursue individual complaints unless it is directly linked to the strategic priorities of the Committee.

iii. The Committee noted Hansard transcripts for the oral briefings on the 12 March 2025 in respect of the Committee's Inquiry into the Northern Ireland Banking and Financial Services Landscape – from the National Federation of Sub-postmasters and Millisle Community Association.

18. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the Forward Work Programme, as drafted.

The Committee noted arrangements for next week's visit and external meeting in Kilkeel as well as arrangements for the Committee's briefings with Building Society and Bank representatives on 9th April 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold an additional meeting on Tuesday 1st April 2025 at 1pm in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings to obtain a briefing from

Departmental officials on the Budget for 2025/26 and implications of the Chancellor's Spring Statement.

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.

19. Any Other Business

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a copy of the Terms of Reference for Professor Holtham's review of the level of need analysis with respect to the Fiscal Framework and to obtain clarity on what level of resource and secretariat support was provided to facilitate the research.

20. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Tuesday 1st April 2025 at 1.00pm in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 3.50pm.

Diane Forsythe

Deputy Chairperson, Committee for Finance

2 April 2025