



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

4 December 2024

Meeting Location: Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Phillip Brett MLA

Paul Frew MLA

Eóin Tennyson MLA

Steve Aiken MLA

Online: Gerry Carroll MLA

Nicola Brogan MLA

Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Deirdre Hargey MLA

Apologies: Matthew O'Toole MLA (Chairperson)

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 2:03pm in public session.

1. Apologies

As above. Steve Aiken will act as the Chair for this meeting as Matthew O'Toole has submitted apologies.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 RalSE Chancellor's Budget: Initial Considerations for Northern Ireland

The Chairperson referred Members to a RalSe briefing paper on the Chancellor's Budget: Initial considerations for Northern Ireland. Members expressed their thanks to RalSe for compiling such a useful paper.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the paper will serve as the background paper for the Joint Budget Discussion Roundtable Event on the 29th January 2025.

4. Draft Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of the 27 November 2024.

5. Matters Arising

5.1 1 DALO readout - Extract for responses from 6 November 2024

The Committee noted the DALO readout issued following the meeting on the 6 November 2024.

5.2 Department of Finance - Changes to Employer's National Insurance, Minimum and Living Wages

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding changes to employer's national insurance, minimum and living wages. The Department have indicated that officials continue to engage with the Treasury to better understand the impact of the tax measures announced as part of the Autumn Budget. The Finance Minister is also engaging directly with stakeholders to discuss the impact of the Budget. Additionally officials are engaging with other Executive departments to consider their analysis in this regard, and the feedback they have received from their stakeholders on the impact of the budget on individual sectors. The department also outlined they will consider what further analysis or research might be useful to strengthen the evidence base.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department to expedite the discussions with Treasury on these changes and any funding that comes from those discussions.

5.3 Department of Finance - City & Growth Deals

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to City & Growth Deals. The Committee had requested further information on how actual communities as well as community organisations feed into the region deals as well as information on how they are supported to engage with growth deals in general.

The Department have provided the information with responses being sought directly from the four City and Growth Deals and then collated by the Department.

5.4 Department of Finance - LCM – Property (Digital Assets etc.) Bill

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding the LCM in the Property (Digital Assets etc.) Bill. The Department have indicated that the Finance Minister is seeking Executive agreement to the extension of the Property (Digital Assets etc.) Bill to this jurisdiction via Legislative Consent Motion and it is hoped that it will be considered and approved by the Executive Committee on 21 November 2024.

5.5 and 5.6 Department of Finance - Bereavement Service in Northern Ireland

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to Bereavement Service in Northern Ireland. The Department have indicated that Officials within Land & Property Services (LPS) are mindful of the difficult circumstances faced by families following a bereavement. In recent months LPS have gained access to bereavement information held by the General Register Office and are working on developing processes to improve the expediency of updating rate accounts following the passing of a ratepayer. The Department have also indicated that LPS officials will also contact the Bereavement Service to discuss the potential for greater data sharing between the departments.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the response to the Committee for Justice for information.

5.7 Department of Finance - Electric Fleet Vehicles

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding electric fleet vehicles. The Department have indicated that it has eight owned and two leased motor vehicles, none of which are electric, one is hybrid and that electric alternatives will be sourced when replacement vehicles are required. The Department has also indicated that while all vehicles within its fleet are currently in use, one lorry is currently undergoing annual service and was due back into operation on the 20 November 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the response to the Committee for Infrastructure for information.

5.8 Department of Finance - Northern Ireland Housing Executive's ability to borrow funds.

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's (NIHE) ability to borrow funds. The Department have indicated that officials have been facilitating discussions and engagement between DfC and Treasury officials, where DfC made the case for a change to the application of guidance with respect to NIHE borrowing. Treasury officials indicated at that stage that their view was that any further engagement should continue under the remit of discussions around a future fiscal framework. The Department also indicated that the Finance Minister met with Minister for Communities on the 12 November and provided an update as to the current position.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 2.22pm and returned at 2.25pm.

Eóin Tennyson joined the meeting at 2.23pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Finance Minister to ask why these issues are conflated and to continue pursuing the issue with UK Treasury.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to CST to ask that they reinforce and question the delinking of the issue when meeting with Treasury officials. The Committee also agreed to copy the letter to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

5.9 Department of Finance - SEUPB Accounts 2023

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding SEUPB Accounts for 2023. The Department indicated that the Accounts are at the final stages of review by the NIAO and it is anticipated this will be concluded imminently.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department regarding the speed of delivery of SEUPB accounts, outlining its concern around the lateness of these accounts being laid and the implications for the Committee's scrutiny of them.

5.10 Retail NI - Submission to Banking Inquiry

The Committee noted correspondence from Retail NI has as part of Committee's Call for Evidence on Banking and Financial Services in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to publish the submission on the Inquiry webpage.

5.11 Department of Finance - Revised NICS Discipline Policy

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to the Revised NICS Discipline Policy. The Department have indicated that the policy review has been completed with a view to implementation of the new policy taking place before March 2025.

5.12 Welsh Parliament Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee - Development Bank of Wales

The Committee noted correspondence and a report from the Welsh Parliament Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee regarding the development of the Bank of Wales. The Report details the Committee's Inquiry into the performance of the Development of the Bank of Wales, how it has performed and the extent to which it is fulfilling the Welsh Government's aims and objectives.

Steve Aiken declared an interest having previously met with both Members of the Welsh Parliament and the Bank of Wales to discuss this issue.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the report and related papers as part of the Committee's Banking Inquiry.

5.13 Minister of Finance - Private Entity to utilise Financial Transactions Capital

The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Finance regarding Private Entity to utilise Financial Transactions Capital.

The Committee previously requested information on the use of Financial Transactions Capital (FTC) including concerns about underspend, the use of FTC for regeneration projects, co-operative or social enterprise use of FTC and reasons for an under-utilisation of FTC. The Minister has replied setting out several issues to be considered in relation to the use of FTC for regeneration projects.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to bring this item back to next week's meeting as the Chairperson has a specific interest on this issue.

5.14 Gender Recognition Act - Update on Developments

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to the Gender Recognition Act. The Department has indicated that they are content to provide updates on this issue should there be any further policy development.

6. Open Government in Northern Ireland - Oral Briefing from Northern Ireland Open Government Network

The following representatives joined the meeting at 2.28pm.

Rebekah McCabe, Chair, Northern Ireland Open Government Network

Colm Burns, Board Member, Northern Ireland Open Government Network

Andrew Bolster, Board Member, Northern Ireland Open Government Network

The officials briefed the Committee on the work of the Northern Ireland Open Government Network.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the issues around the implementation of the Open Government Partnership Local Action Plan in Northern Ireland.

Steve Aiken declared an interest as being part of the British Irish Parliamentary Association delegation where the digitisation of local services within the Estonian and Finnish governments were discussed.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 2.56pm and returned at 3.05pm.

The officials left the meeting at 3.31pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write the Minister for Finance to raise its concerns surrounding the potential for Northern Ireland to be “expelled” from the Open

Government Partnership if it does not fulfil its obligations. The Committee also agreed to copy this letter to the Head of the Civil Service.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Open Government to request that they provide the subsequent follow-up information:

- Information on the number of FOI's that have been unanswered from the Department.
- Details on the monitoring plan and costings of local government strategies including examples of good practice in the Republic of Ireland.
- The Term's of Reference regarding the new Multi Stakeholder Forum agreed between NICS and NIOGN.

7. Northern Ireland Investment Fund and UK Infrastructure Bank/National Wealth Fund - Oral Briefing from the Department

The following representatives joined the meeting at 3.32pm.

Patrick Neeson Assistant Secretary, Public Spending Directorate

Ian Fleming Principal Economist, Public Spending Directorate

The officials briefed the Committee providing background on the Northern Ireland Investment Fund along with the establishment of the UK Infrastructure Bank / National Wealth Fund.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including Funds available within Northern Ireland, the establishment of Great British Energy and promotion of the Fund across Northern Ireland.

The officials left the meeting at 4.05pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department for further information regarding costings for CBRE to manage the Fund on behalf of DoF.

8. Correspondence

- i. The Committee noted a report from the Older People's Parliament and its Consultation response on the draft Programme for Government 2024-2027.
- ii. The Committee noted a Hansard transcript for the oral briefing on the 20 November 2024 from the Department on the NICS Sickness Absence 2023-24 and Human Resources-related Matters.
- iii. The Committee noted a Hansard transcript for the oral briefing on the 20 November 2024 from the Department on the Property (Digital Assets etc.) Bill Legislative Consent Memorandum.
- iv. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Communities to the Department of Finance regarding NICVA Transformation Plans Fair Pay & Grant and Contract Arrangements.

9. 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:

- Reminder that the informal meeting with the Business Coalition will take place on Monday 9th December at 11am.
- The first meeting after Christmas recess will be on Wednesday 15 January 2025 with oral briefings on the Budget Sustainability (Annexes) and Retail NI as part of the Banking Inquiry.
- Further oral evidence sessions have been scheduled as part of the meeting on the 25 January 2025 as part of the Inquiry.

- The Committee has received a positive response so far to the invitations to the Joint Budget Event.

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

10. Any Other Business

None.

11. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 11 December 2024 at 2:00pm Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:09pm.

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

11 December 2024