



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Committee for Finance

### Minutes of Proceedings

5 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  
Eóin Tennyson MLA

**Online:** Gerry Carroll MLA  
Nicola Brogan MLA  
Steve Aiken MLA

**Apologies:** Deirdre Hargey MLA

**In Attendance:** Peter Hall Committee Clerk

Clarita Frazer Assistant Assembly Clerk

Sarah-Anne McKinley Assistant Assembly Clerk

Stephen Magee Clerical Supervisor

Heather Graham Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 2:09pm in public session.

## **1. Apologies**

As above.

## **2. Declaration of Interests**

None.

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

### **3.1 Bank of Ireland - Investment Announcement**

The Committee noted correspondence from Bank of Ireland to the Chairperson in relation to an investment announcement. The Bank has announced an investment of £100m in enhanced products and services including payments, digital channels and self-service options.

### **3.2 Minister of Finance - National Insurance Impact**

The Chairperson discussed the written statement made by Baroness Stevenage in the House of Lords on Monday 3rd February indicating that allocations worth £520m to councils in England with a separate £13m allocated to Mayoral Combined Authorities. The Chairperson also referenced comments made by the (now former) Finance Minister made indicating that funding provided by the UK Treasury will leave Northern Ireland £100m short in covering the increase in employer National Insurance contributions. Urgent clarity was sought from the DALO on whether there will be any Barnett Consequentials coming from Monday's announcement and, if so, whether they will be ring-fenced for local government or un-hypothecated. Additionally, clarity on £100m figure quoted by the Minister: how it has been calculated and what parts of the public sector the figure covers.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask the Department for an urgent update on these issues and how the Minister intends to address any funding gaps with respect to this.

### **3.3 New Minister for Finance**

The Chairperson highlighted to Members that John O'Dowd replaced Dr Caoimhe Archibald as Minister on Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> February. The Chairperson thanked the former Finance Minister for her tenure and wished her well in her new ministerial position within the Department for Economy.

The new Minister has written to introduce himself and the letter will be included in next week's pack.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister welcoming him to the Department indicating the Committee's desire to work constructively with him.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to seek confirmation that the Minister will take up his predecessor's commitment to attend and speak at the meeting of the Interparliamentary Finance Committee Forum on Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> March.

### **3.4 Secretary of State for NI – NIO briefing on Public Sector Transformation Board**

The Chairperson updated Members on a response emailed to the Committee from the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State has indicated that he remains of the view that it would not be appropriate for UK Government officials to brief the Committee on the PTSB. The letter will be in the next meeting pack.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to discuss the letter more fully at next week's meeting.

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

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of the 29<sup>th</sup> January 2025.

## **5. Matters Arising**

### **5.1 Minister of Finance - Supplementary Consultation Domestic Rating Policy**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Finance regarding the strategic roadmap of the rating policy. The Minister has indicated that they have commenced a supplementary consultation on elevating the current level of the maximum capital value on domestic properties from £400k to £485K and on reducing the early payment discount from 4% to 2%. The consultation opened on Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> January and will close on the 25<sup>th</sup> April 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask the Department that the Committee is kept fully informed about the results of the consultation in due course with Members reserving the right to act as super-consultee to the consultation.

### **5.2 Minister of Finance - Written Ministerial Statement on Cash Advance from NI Consolidated Fund**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Finance in relation to a Written Ministerial Statement on the cash advance from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund. The Minister has outlined how they have authorised a cash advance of up to a maximum of £27m and that this will be repaid once the Budget Bill 2025 is passed by the Assembly and has received Royal Assent.

The statement was also emailed to Members on Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> January.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek clarification as to whether this advance was routine as it was anticipated, or whether it was exceptional.

### **5.3 Department of Finance - Department of Finance 2024-2025 Supplementary Estimate Memorandum**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding the 2024-2025 Supplementary Estimate Memorandum. The Department have provided a copy of its memorandum for the 24-25 2024-2025 SSEs. The Memorandum sets out the main components of the Department's final budget for 2024-2025; shown as resource and capital DEL. The Department have also provided a between 23-24 outturn, 24-25 Main Estimates and 24-25 SSEs, with the main causes for change and spending trends over the last 3 years detailed.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek further clarifications regarding aspects of the memorandum, specifically Capital DEL Easements.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek an oral briefing regarding the Contingent Liabilities highlighted in the memorandum.

#### **5.4 Department of Finance - PAC Report on Child Poverty in Northern Ireland**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding the PAC Report on Child Poverty in Northern Ireland. Members previously agreed to seek an update from the Department on progress towards implementation of recommendation 9 in the PAC report. The Department indicated how they have provided input to guidance on the Act and that they intend to engage with Departments and select stakeholders to seek additional information on awareness and barriers to potential use. The intention is to produce an action plan aligned to the multi-year budget process.

The Department also indicated that they intend to use a Department of Education report on the operation of the Act to further inform the development of this action plan.

**The Deputy Chairperson declared an interest as a Member of the PAC.**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note this update and to receive a further briefing from the Department following engagement with stakeholders and the development of an action plan.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to share the update with both the Communities and Education Committee as well as the Public Accounts Committee and inform them of this Committee's proposed action in this regard.

#### **5.5 Committee for Communities - National Insurance Contributions and Impact on the Voluntary Community Sector**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Communities to the Minister of Finance. The Committee for Communities have wrote to the Minister regarding the "Cost of Doing Business" research and have requested a copy of that research once published.

## **5.6 Development Trusts NI - Banking and Financial Services Landscape Inquiry Fair Banking Act**

The Committee noted correspondence from Development Trusts NI in relation to the Financial Inclusion Strategy and the new Financial Inclusion Committee. The Trust has forwarded a briefing paper outlining the Fair Banking Act and a research paper on the impact a Fair Banking Act could have which have been produced by the Finance Innovation Lab.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to include these papers as part of the Committee's evidence base and to schedule a briefing from the Finance Innovation Lab as part of the Committee's Inquiry.

## **5.7 DALO Readout extract of request following 15th January meeting**

The Committee noted the DALO Readout table issued following the meeting on 15 January 2025.

## **5.8 Department of Finance - Gender Responsive Budgeting**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding gender responsive budgeting. The Department have indicated that that they continue to progress work on this area as part of the Budget Improvement Plan, including engaging with Ulster University and the Department's work on the cumulative Equality Impact Assessment completed as part of the draft 2025-2026 Budget. The Department have also indicated how they intend to provide gender budgeting toolkit materials to departments to help them consider policy formulation in the 2025-2026 financial year.

## **5.9 Department of Finance - Cost of Doing Business in NI Research**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to the cost of doing business in Northern Ireland research. The Department have provided a copy of the Terms of Reference for the research indicating that it will cover a broad range of factors including the impacts of the recent Budget announcements, including around additional employer National Insurance Contributions as well as other contributing factors such as insurance, property and energy costs. The property costs element is expected to include businesses' annual rates liability. The

Department have also highlighted that DfE officials are part of the Department's steering group for the research.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the correspondence to the Economy Committee and the Committee for Communities for their information.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to seek greater clarity from the Department regarding the rates element of the research as Members believe it should be a prominent part of the research following the Joint Event with the Economy Committee on 29<sup>th</sup> January regarding the impacts of the Chancellor's Autumn Budget Statement; additionally, Members wish to see the research reflect differences between council areas and other regional imbalances.

#### **5.10 Department of Finance - Audit Trail for disposals**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding the sales of public sector properties. The Department have provided further information on the guidance when there is competing prospective purchaser interest within the internal market pathway. The Department have also indicated that the asset owner considered random selection to be the most expedient means to deliver on its requirements.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek an oral briefing on these disposals and the policies involved more widely.

#### **5.11 Department of Finance - NI Investment Fund CBRE Management**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to CBRE management of the Northern Ireland investment fund. The Department have outlined CBRE's responsibilities in making investment decisions and highlighted that the performance of CBRE is monitored on an ongoing basis by the Scrutiny Board.

The Department have also indicated that the appointment of CBRE followed a competitive procurement process and that CBRE contract tenure is fifteen years and that four external gateway reviews have been completed to date.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask the Department for details on the other companies who tendered for the management of the Fund; to request the findings of the 4<sup>th</sup> gateway review undertaken on the Fund; to seek evidence of reviews of the

effectiveness of the management of the Fund; and the membership of the Scrutiny Board.

**Agreed:** To request an oral briefing on the Fund from the Permanent Secretary as Accounting Officer to whom the Fund's Scrutiny Board reports, following receipt of the information above.

#### **5.12 Department of Finance - Budget Sustainability Plan (5 year plans)**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding Departmental 5 year plans as part of the Budget Sustainability Plan. The Department have indicated that officials continue to develop guidance in relation to these plans, however as part of that guidance document Departments will be asked to provide information on their strategic direction including alignment to any final Programme for Government. The Department have also indicated how Departments will be asked to agree and publish plans to align with the upcoming multi-year budget process.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek information from the Department regarding the format and content of the Business Plans, as well as clarity on whether they will be accompanied by indicative budgets.

#### **6. SL1 The Rate Relief (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025- Oral Briefing from Department Officials**

The Committee considered a proposal by the Department to make a statutory rule under powers conferred by Article 30A of the Rates (NI) Order 1977 making consequential adjustments to the principal Regulations for the rate rebate scheme, the Rate Relief Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017; to ensure continued compatibility of the scheme with UC migration.

The proposed rule will be subject to affirmative resolution procedure.

**Agreed:** The Committee for Finance agreed that it was content with the proposed Statutory Rule under powers conferred by Article 30A of the Rates (NI) Order 1977 making consequential adjustments to the principal Regulations for the rate rebate scheme, the Rate Relief Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017; to ensure continued compatibility of the scheme with UC migration.



**7. SR 10/2025 – The Recognition of Professional Qualifications and Implementation of International Recognition Agreements (Amendment) (Extension to Switzerland etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025**

The Chairperson indicated that the Department and the Examiner of Statutory Rules are in discussion around a potential drafting error in the Rule. Subsequent to the resolution of this issue, the Department requested that the Rule be withdrawn from the meeting agenda.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to remove the Statutory Rule from the meeting agenda following a request from the Department.

**8. NI Banking and Financial Services Landscape - Oral Briefing: Advice NI**

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

The following official joined the meeting at via Zoom at 2:57pm;

Dr Bridget Meehan, Policy Officer, Advice NI

The official briefed the Committee on the banking and financial services landscape for the community and voluntary sector. The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including commercial banking services and deregulation, financial exclusion and the creation of a mutual regional bank.

The official left the meeting at 3.45pm

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 3.45pm and returned at 3.46pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to receive follow-up information from Dr Meehan as per the discussion.

**9. Correspondence**

- i. The Committee noted a report from the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee - Regulation (EU) 2024/3110 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 November 2024 laying down

harmonised rules for the marketing of construction products and repealing Regulation (EU) No 305/2011.

- ii. The Committee noted a report from the Northern Ireland Executive Office in Brussels on its progress from October to December 2024.
- iii. The Committee noted a report from Pivotal on the first year of the restored NI Executive.
- iv. The Committee noted further correspondence from an individual regarding a complaint about governance within the Department of Finance.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the individual to inform that the Committee does not deal with individual complaints as per Members' agreement at the first meeting of the Committee and that Members would not engage further.

- v. The Committee noted a newsletter from the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly for the month of January.

## **10. 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 next two meetings on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> February will begin at 1pm;
- Timescales for actions regarding the Legislative Consent Motion on Property (Digital Assets etc.) Bill; and
- Timings for the Interparliamentary Finance Committee Forum meeting hosted by the Committee on 19<sup>th</sup> March.

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

## **11. Any Other Business**

Mr Frew raised the issue of primary legislation coming from the Department.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider the Bills update table at the next meeting.

The Chairperson indicated that he would begin a period of Paternity Leave towards the end of March.

The Chairperson thanked Ms Nicola Brogan for her service to the Committee following receipt of the Order Paper for Monday 10<sup>th</sup> February indicating that Ms Brogan will leave the Committee to be replaced by Ms Jemma Dolan. Ms Brogan thanked the Chairperson and Members for their sentiments and wished them well going forward.

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

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 12 February 2025 at 1:00pm in the Senate Chamber Parliament Buildings,

The meeting was adjourned at 4.58pm

**Matthew O'Toole MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for Finance**

**12 February 2025**