



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

5 March 2025

Meeting Location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

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

Online: Gerry Carroll MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance:

- Peter Hall Committee Clerk
- Clairita Frazer Assistant Assembly Clerk

Stephen Magee Clerical Supervisor

Heather Graham Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 2:08pm in public session.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs – Agriculture Bill

The Chairperson considered a request from the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for the Finance Committee's views on the Agriculture Bill.

Jemma Dolan expressed concern that funding of fruit and vegetable aid could become discretionary.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to indicate a nil return to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

3.2 & 3.3 Minister of Finance – Oral Statement – Progress of the Transformation Programme; and

5.24 DALO Readout response – Public Sector Transformation Board

The Committee considered notification of a Ministerial Oral Statement on progress of the Transformation Programme and a copy of the statement which was made in the Assembly on Tuesday 4 March 2025. The Committee also considered information provided by the Department of Finance on the secretariat for the Public Sector Transformation Board.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek clarification on a number of items including clarification on the other 5 non-digital proposals which progressed to Stage 2 assessment but were not awarded funding, the expected timescale for finalisation of the “Digital Maturity Assessment”, how the £129m of Transformation Programme funding will be profiled, when it will be drawn down, if it will be ring-fenced, if there are any conditions for the funding and details of the Transformation Delivery Unit.

Deirdre Hargey joined the meeting at 2:13pm.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 2:20pm.

Gerry Carroll joined the meeting at 2:21pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule an oral briefing on the Public Sector Transformation Board when the information requested had been considered.

3.4 Programme for Government 2024-27

The Committee noted a copy of the Programme for Government 2024-27 which was agreed and published by the First and deputy First Minister and debated in the Assembly on Monday 3 March 2025.

3.5 Invite to the Children’s Law Centre Annual Lecture 2025

The Committee noted that the Chairperson had been invited to the Children’s Law Centre Annual Lecture 2025 to take place on Wednesday 30th April 2025 and that he would be sending his apologies as it falls on a Committee day.

4. Draft Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of the 26 February 2025.

5. Matters Arising

5.1 Minister of Finance - Budget Bill Spring Supplementary Estimates 2024-25

The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Finance to the Business Office regarding a revised version of the Spring Supplementary Estimates 2024-25 which were laid in the Business Office on 25 February 2025.

5.2 Department of Finance – 2025-26 Draft Budget

The Committee noted a copy of the 2025-26 Draft Budget. Members also noted that the oral briefing on the Budget 2025-26 scheduled for 26th March, would take place prior to final collation of the responses to the Budget consultation and prior to Executive agreement of a Budget which is required by the end of March.

5.3-5.5 & 5.10 Returns from Statutory Committees – 2025-26 Draft Budgets

The Chairperson considered returns from a number of Statutory Committees regarding the level of briefing and scrutiny of the 2025-26 Draft Budgets. Members noted returns from the Infrastructure, Economy, Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs and Justice Committees in this regard. Members also noted that a return from the Communities Committee had been received and would be in meeting packs for next week.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that these responses would be published on the Finance Committee webpages when all returns were received from Statutory Committees.

5.6 Hansard Transcript – Department of Finance draft Budget 2025-26

The Committee noted a Hansard transcript of the Department of Finance - Budget 2025-26 Oral Briefing which took place on 19th February 2025.

5.7 Department of Finance Quarterly Sickness Absence

The Committee considered the latest quarterly NICS sickness absence figures for the period October – December 2024.

Steve Aiken declared an interest given his related constituency work and engagement with Prison Officers on this issue.

Paul Frew left the meeting at 2:29pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to copy the information to all other Statutory Committees for appropriate scrutiny. Members also agreed to compile all relevant information and schedule oral briefings on this matter when the forward work programme permits.

5.26 DALO Readout response – NICS Sickness Comparisons

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance regarding endorsement of comparative data provided in the NISRA 2023-24 Sickness Absence Report, pending an oral briefing when the forward programme permits. Members also noted the potential for a scoping exercise in the autumn to examine comparisons in greater detail.

5.8 Public Accounts Committee – Release of Reports

Phillip Brett returned to the meeting at 2:32pm.

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

The Committee considered correspondence from the Public Accounts Committee indicating that it has released the following reports: “NI Non-Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive scheme; Assessing progress with the implementation of the Public Inquiry recommendations” and “NI Non-Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme: Assessing progress with the implementation of the Public Inquiry recommendations (Second Report).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to maintain a watching briefing on the recommendations of the Public Inquiry and to seek an update from the Department of Finance on the next 6-monthly progress update on recommendations.

5.9 Committee for the Economy – AI in public services in Estonia

Paul Frew returned to the meeting at 2:35pm.

The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for the Economy providing a paper from Dr Vincent Charles, Reader in AI for Business and Management Science at Queen's Business School, Queen's University Belfast, on AI in public services in Estonia.

5.11 Communities Committee – Employer's National Insurance Contributions

The Committee considered correspondence from the Communities Committee requesting a copy of the note taken during the Committee for Finance and Committee for the Economy's joint roundtable event on the Chancellor's Autumn Budget Statement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Hansard transcript of the event to the Communities Committee.

5.12 DALO Readout extract of requests made following 5 February meeting

The Committee noted the DALO Readout extract of requests made following 5 February meeting.

5.13 DALO Readout response – Treasury Funding to cover the rise in Employer's National Insurance Contributions

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance on Treasury Funding to cover the rise in Employer's National Insurance Contributions. Members also noted that the Barnett consequentialists cannot be determined until the Westminster Main Estimates process concludes later this year.

5.14 DALO Readout response – Domestic Rating Policy – Supplementary Consultation

The Committee noted an assurance from the Department of Finance that it would keep the Committee fully informed about the results of the Domestic Rating Policy – Supplementary Consultation.

5.15 DALO Readout response – Cash Advance from the NI Consolidated Fund

The Committee noted clarification from the Department of Finance on the Cash Advance from the NI Consolidated Fund.

5.16 DALO Readout response – Supplementary Estimate Memorandum – Capital Easements

The Committee considered further information from the Department of Finance on capital easements as a result of ongoing legal challenge.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to copy the information to other Statutory Committees given the potential jeopardy to small construction works projects. Members also agreed to seek assurance from the Department of Finance in this regard.

5.17 DALO Readout response – PAC Report on Child Poverty in NI

The Committee noted an update from the Department of Finance on work in relation to the Children’s Services Cooperation Act and associated action plan.

5.18 DALO Readout response – Cost of Doing Business in NI

The Committee considered clarification provided by the Department of Finance on the “Cost of Doing Business in NI Research”.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to copy this clarification to both the Communities and Economy Committee.

5.19 DALO Readout response – Disposal of Assets

The Committee noted that an oral briefing on Disposal of Assets had been scheduled for Wednesday 12 March 2025.

5.20 DALO Readout response – NI Investment Fund - CBRE Management

The Committee noted briefing material and detail from the Department of Finance on the NI Investment Funding pending the oral briefing from Department of Finance officials later in the meeting.

5.21 DALO Readout response – Budget Sustainability Plans

The Committee considered clarification provided by the Department of Finance on the status of the Budget Sustainability Plans which will be produced by all departments and that guidance would be copied to the Committee when formally commissioned.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to maintain a watching brief on the Budget Sustainability Plans and to copy this clarification to other Statutory Committees for their information.

5.22 DALO Readout extract of requests made following 12 February meeting

The Committee noted the DALO Readout extract of requests made following 12 February meeting.

5.23 DALO Readout response – WMS – Further Resource DEL Allocations 2024-25

The Committee considered information provided by the Department of Finance on further resource DEL bids and allocations within the 2024-25 financial year.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share information in relation to funding to Translink with the Infrastructure Committee.

5.25 DALO Readout response – Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)

The Committee considered an update provided by the Department of Finance on the cross departmental work in relation to SLAPPs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to copy the update to the Justice Committee for its information.

5.27 DALO Readout response – Budget Bill – Utility Regulator Funding

The Committee noted detail provided by the Department of Finance on funding arrangements for the Utility Regulator.

The Committee considered agenda item 8: Correspondence.

8. Correspondence

- i. The Committee noted the Lay Observer Annual Report April 2023-March 2024 which was laid in the Business Office on 26 February 2025.
- ii. The Committee noted a Hansard transcript for the oral briefing on the 19th February 2025 on the Inquiry into the Northern Ireland Banking and Financial Services Landscape: Irish League of Credit Unions; Ulster Federation of Credit Unions.

6. NI Investment Fund – Oral briefing by the Department of Finance

The following officials joined the meeting at 2:52pm;

Neil Gibson Permanent Secretary, Accounting Officer;

Patrick Neeson Assistant Secretary, PSD and

Ian Fleming Principal Economist, PSD.

The Committee noted relevant papers provided by the Department on CBRE responsibilities, value for money assessments and briefing material on the NI Investment Fund which was provided in advance of today's briefing. Members also noted the restricted marking on some of the material referenced.

The Permanent Secretary and departmental officials briefed the Committee on the NI Investment Fund including CBRE Management of the Fund.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including interest rates for funding, details of the Fund's Scrutiny Board, challenges to securing funding for low carbon/renewable

energy projects, social value outcomes, Financial Transactions Capital allocations, the winding up process for the Fund and a successor fund.

Steve Aiken declared an interest as an acquaintance of a Scrutiny Board member and recused himself from the briefing at 3:23pm.

The Chairperson thanked the officials and they left the meeting at 4pm.

Agreed: The Committee for Finance agreed to request that it is kept informed of developments around the final years of the Fund and of any information in respect of a successor fund. Members also agreed to seek confirmation of the average term of members on the Scrutiny Board for the Fund.

Deirdre Hargey left the meeting at 4:01pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into closed session for the next agenda item.

The Committee meeting moved into closed session at 4:02pm.

7. Department of Finance Contingent Liabilities – Oral briefing by Department of Finance

The following official joined the meeting at 4:02pm;

Gavin Patrick Director of Finance Division.

The Committee noted relevant papers provided by the Department on its 23 potential (contingent) liabilities that may or may not occur depending on the result of an uncertain future event. Members also noted the restricted marking on some of the material referenced.

The departmental official briefed the Committee on the detail of the potential liabilities.

Deirdre Hargey returned to the meeting at 4:04pm.

Steve Aiken returned to the meeting at 4:07pm.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the timeframe for the Department of Finance's contingent liabilities.

The Chairperson thanked the official and he left the meeting at 4:13pm.

The Committee moved back into public session at 4:13pm.

9. 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, the external Committee meeting and visit to Kilkeel on 2nd April and arrangements for oral briefings with Banks and Building Societies on 9th April.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to start the Committee meeting on 12th March at the earlier time of 1pm. Steve Aiken indicated that he may be late to that meeting. Members also agreed to postpone a research briefing on Wealth Building measures to the meeting on 26th March. Members also agreed to start the Committee meeting on 9th April 2025 at the earlier time of 1pm.

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.

The Deputy Chairperson proposed that the Committee would explore the potential for a public call for evidence in respect of the Inquiry into Banking and Financial Services Landscape.

10. Any Other Business

None.

11. Date and Time of next meeting

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

The meeting was adjourned at 4:24pm.

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

12 March 2025