



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

11 December 2024

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

Steve Aiken MLA

Deirdre Hargey MLA

Online: Gerry Carroll MLA

Nicola Brogan MLA

Apologies: None

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 2:05pm in public session.

1. Apologies

Diane Forsythe declared an interest as a Member of the Audit Committee in relation to item 5.23 under Matter's Arising.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson thanked Steve Aiken for chairing last week's meeting in his absence.

Gerry Carroll joined the meeting at 2.10pm.

3.1 Draft Correspondence to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

The Chairperson referred Members to a draft letter to the Secretary of State (SoS) on behalf of the Committee. The Committee previously agreed at its meeting on 27th

November to consider a reply to the SoS regarding the Northern Ireland Executive Restoration Package.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the draft subject to amendments discussed and for the letter to be sent to the SoS.

3.2 and 3.3 Peace Summit Partnership - Correspondence and Request for meeting

The Chairperson referred Members to correspondence and a request to meet the Committee from the Peace Summit Partnership. The Partnership also forwarded a copy of its correspondence to the Executive and its response to the draft Programme for Government (PfG).

Agreed: The Committee agreed for the Clerk to ask the Executive Office Committee if they have also received the correspondence as TEO is the lead Department on the draft PfG.

3.4 Meeting with Northern Ireland Affairs Committee - Tuesday 3rd December 2024

The Chairperson updated Members following an informal meeting with the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which took place on Tuesday 3 December. The Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson attended on behalf of the Committee. Members discussed a number of issues including Northern Ireland's current fiscal position, the Budget Sustainability Plan and the background to the Committee's Banking Inquiry.

3.5 Informal meeting with Northern Ireland Business Coalition - Monday 9th December 2024

The Chairperson updated Members following an informal meeting with a number of representatives of the Northern Ireland Business Coalition, which took place on Monday 9 December. Members discussed the impact of the Autumn Budget on local businesses across Northern Ireland. Members also noted a brief summary of the meeting and revised letter from the Business Coalition reflecting their increased membership.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Finance Minister to ask what measures are being put in place for urgent business support, to ask if DoF and DfE have carried out any assessment on the potential impact of the tax increases from April 2025 and to ask if LPS could be more lenient in regards to business rates.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to develop a roundtable event with Northern Ireland Chambers of Commerce to discuss their experiences in relation to banking and financial services.

3.6 LCM - Property (Digital Assets etc.) Bill 2024

The Chairperson referred Members to correspondence from the Department in relation to the timing for the anticipated LCM - Property (Digital Assets etc.) Bill.

To allow the Committee enough time to agree its position in relation to the LCM, the Clerk had suggested that the LCM should not be laid before 16th January 2025. Officials have agreed that this timeframe is acceptable.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule consideration of this LCM at its meeting on 22 January 2025.

4. Draft Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of the 4 December 2024.

5. Matters Arising

5.1 DALO readout - Extract for responses 20 November 2024

The Committee noted the DALO readout issued following the meeting on the 20 November 2024.

5.2 Department of Finance - Minister's Banking Roundtable

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department following the Minister of Finance hosting a banking roundtable on the 20th November with local stakeholders.

The Department have indicated how the event provided a valuable platform to discuss key issues and developments around access to cash and banking services affecting Northern Ireland. Officials are now developing a short, focused report from the roundtable, which will be shared with the Committee in due course.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to include the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters and Millisle Community Association to the Committee Inquiry targeted list of consultees.

5.3 Department of Finance - Public Sector Transformation Board

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation Public Sector Transformation Board. The Committee had requested minutes from the Finance Minister's meeting with the Head of the Civil Service on 31 July 2024. The Department have provided the note of the meeting.

5.4 Department of Finance - Government Accounts Branch

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding the Government Accounts Branch following their oral evidence session at the Committee on the 27 November 2024. Officials thanked the Committee for the offer of support and indicated that there is nothing currently however they will write to the Committee if assistance is required.

5.5 Department of Finance - Secondary Legislation Forward Work Plan

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to the Secondary Legislation Forward Work Plan. The Department have provided a schedule; however, dates are either not provided and or are provided covering entire months.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department to provide specific dates for all the items of Secondary Legislation.

5.6 Minister of Finance - Correspondence to Concurrent Committee for Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs and Committee for Infrastructure

This Committee noted in a response from the Minister of Finance to the Chairs of the AERA and Infrastructure Committees. A number of queries had been raised with the Minister regarding the vesting of the land for the A5 Corridor. The Committee was copied into the correspondence for information.

5.7 Minister of Finance - Creation of a Private Entity to Utilise FTC for Development/ Regeneration

The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Finance in relation to the Creation of a Private Entity to Utilise FTC for Development/ Regeneration. The Committee had raised several issues in relation to 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 now responded to the issues raised by the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to urge the Minister of Finance to ask officials to research the existing issues regarding the use of FTC, given that no detailed study has been undertaken.

Paul Frew left the meeting at 2.24pm and returned at 2.24pm.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 2.37pm and returned at 2.37pm.

5.8 Minister for Agriculture - Written Statement Farm Support and Development Programme Update

The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister for Agriculture regarding a Written Statement that the Minister made to the Assembly on the 3 December 2024 providing an update on Farm Support and Development Programme.

5.9 and 5.10 Department of Finance - Commissioning Letters to Departments 2024/25 SSEs and January Monitoring

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to the January Monitoring Round 2024-2025 and Spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) 2024-2025. The Department have indicated that they have formally commissioned returns from Departments on the January Monitoring round and are commissioning the 2024-2025 SSEs to facilitate the legislative stage in the budgetary process.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to circulate this information to other Statutory Committees.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department for a list of collated responses of which Departments adhered to the deadlines set by the Public Spending Directorate and to ask if the DoF is aware of any difficulties encountered by Departments completing the template documents.

5.11 Department of Finance - Membership of the Fiscal Council

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding the Membership of the Fiscal Council. The Department have indicated that Alan Barrett, Chief Executive of the Economic and Social Research Institute has been reappointed to the Council for a term up to 31st March 2026.

5.12 Committee for Infrastructure - Motor Insurance Taskforce

The Committee noted correspondence from Committee for Infrastructure regarding the Motor Insurance Taskforce. The Committee has been copied into the correspondence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed for the Clerk to do some further exploration on this issue with the Economy and Justice Committees to assess what they are doing on the issue.

5.13 Department of Finance - Quarterly Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service July 2024 to September 2024

The Committee noted correspondence and a report from NISRA regarding the Quarterly Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service for July 2024 to September 2024.

5.17 NICS Sickness Absence 23/24 and HR Related matters

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to NICS Sickness Absence 23/24 and HR Related matters. The Department have indicated that information is still being collated in relation to the analysis of sick absence due to stress, anxiety related illnesses set against the number of vacancies in the Department where staff work and against the volume of staff complaints regarding bullying/harassment/related issues in absentee's area of work.

5.14 University of Ulster - Response to Draft Programme for Government

The Committee noted correspondence and a series of papers from the University of Ulster Strategic Policy Unit in relation to its response to the Draft Programme for Government.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider briefings on relevant papers going forward should it be appropriate.

5.15 Urgent Ministerial Oral Statement - Rating Policy Strategic Roadmap

The Committee noted an Urgent Ministerial Oral Statement from the Minister of Finance regarding the agreed approach to reform and change of the rates system over the remainder of the mandate. A copy of the statement was emailed to Members on the 9 December 2024.

5.16 Minister of Finance - Legislative Time Frames

The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Finance with regard to the legislative time frame of the Registration of Deaths, Still Births and Baby Loss Bill, the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill and the Financial Services Provision Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to outline the Committee's concern around the delay of the Registration of Deaths, Still Births and Baby Loss Bill. The Committee also agreed to ask the Department for more specific dates in relation to the forthcoming legislation including the Fiscal Council Bill.

5.18 Justice Committee - Bereavement Service in Northern Ireland

The Committee noted correspondence from the Justice Committee regarding Bereavement Service in Northern Ireland. The Justice Committee have wrote to the DoF to state that it would support a similar service to the 'Tell Us Once' service in Great Britain being available in Northern Ireland. DoF have now responded. The Committee has been copied into the correspondence.

5.19 Justice Committee - October Monitoring Round Outcome 2024/2025

The Committee noted correspondence from the Justice Committee in relation to the October Monitoring Round Outcome for 2024/2025. The Justice Committee have provided information from the Department of Justice on the outcome of the 2024-25 October Monitoring Round, and details of remaining budgetary pressures.

5.20 Justice Committee - Department of Justice Budget 2025-2026 Equality Impacts

The Committee noted correspondence from the Justice Committee regarding Justice Budget 2025-26 Equality Impacts. The Justice Committee have provided the response to the DoF from the DoJ providing further information on Budget 2025-2026 Equality Impacts.

Action: The Committee agreed to write to other Statutory Committees to ascertain if they have received information on potential equality impacts of the draft budget for 2025-2026.

5.21 Economy Committee - Impact of the Chancellor's Budget Statement

The Committee noted correspondence from the Economy Committee regarding the impact of the Chancellor's Budget Statement. The Committee has been copied into the correspondence.

5.22 Economy Committee - Department for the Economy Staff Vacancies

The Committee noted correspondence from the Economy Committee in relation to DfE staff vacancies. The Economy Committee has shared correspondence it has received from the DfE regarding the impact of the growing level of staff vacancies on Departmental service delivery and the Department's plans to address vacancy levels.

5.23 Audit Committee - Draft Budgets 2025-26 for the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC)

The Committee noted correspondence from the Audit Committee to the Minister of Finance in relation to draft Budgets 2025-26 for the NIAO, NIPSO and the NIAC. Following appropriate evidence gathering and deliberation, the Public Accounts Committee has agreed its position on the 2025-26 budget plans of the three bodies, having sought the views of the Finance Department and, in the case of the NIAO, having sought the view of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC).

Item 5.24 of Matters Arising: Department of Finance - Fujitsu, Integr8 and NOVA Contracts

Agreed: the Committee agreed to deal with this item later in the meeting as the Department asked the Committee to discuss part of the Annex to the response in closed session.

6. Subordinate Legislation SL1 - The Designation of Bodies (Estimates and Accounts) (Amendment) Order 2024

The Committee considered a proposal by the Department to make a statutory rule under the Government Resources and Accounts Act. The rule will be subject to negative resolution procedure and will designate central government bodies in related to named government departments to facilitate the forthcoming Supply Estimates and Accounts.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposed Statutory Rule Subordinate Legislation SL1 - The Designation of Bodies (Estimates and Accounts) (Amendment) Order 2024 subject to an oral briefing from Department officials. The Committee also put on the record its concerns on the short timescale and the inadequacy of the information being sent to Committee.

7. Subordinate Legislation SL1 - The Rates (Small Business Hereditament Relief) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee considered a proposal by the Department to bring forward a statutory rule under the Rates Order. The rule will be subject to negative resolution procedure and will extend the existing Small Business Rate Relief Scheme until 31 March 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposed Statutory Rule to extend the existing Small Business Rate Relief Scheme until 31 March 2026.

8. Rating Policy Update - Oral Briefing from the Land & Property Services (LPS)

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

The following officials joined the meeting at 2.42pm;

Sharon Gallagher, Chief Executive LPS

Angela McGrath, Commissioner of Valuation LPS

Andrew McAvoy, Director, Rating Policy Division LPS

Chris Rooney, Director of Revenues and Benefits LPS

Deirdre Hargey joined the meeting at 2.42pm.

The officials briefed the Committee on the current work programme of LPS.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including the briefing including the new debt collection strategy, the Finance Minister's proposed rates review and Domestic Revaluation 2030.

Steve Aiken left at 3.37pm and returned at 3.57pm.

Phillip Brett left at 3.37pm and returned at 3.45pm.

The officials left the meeting at 4.19pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department for clarity on reconsolidating the figures on point 17 from the LPS briefing paper in comparison to how they were discussed during the oral evidence session. The Committee also agreed to ask the Department what precisely what 'cycle' can mean and if the proposed changes would require specific legislation.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 4.27pm

9. Department of Finance's Memorandum of Reply to a Public Accounts Committee report on Broadband Investment in Northern Ireland - Written Briefing

The Committee considered a written paper from the Department regarding the Department of Finance's Memorandum of Reply to a Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report on Broadband Investment in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to update the PAC in relation to this report and also to copy the Department's response to the Economy Committee given the cross departmental relevance.

10. Correspondence

- i. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department on the UK-Swiss Agreement and legal profession regulation (recognition of professional qualifications).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note this correspondence at this stage pending further consideration on the 15 January 2025.

- ii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Infrastructure to the Minister for Finance regarding the Northern Ireland Water strike.
- iii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Communities to the Department of Finance in relation to the Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Deirdre Hargey left 4.59pm and returned 5.04pm.

- iv. The Committee noted a Hansard transcript for the oral briefing on the 27 November 2024 from the Minister for Finance Ministerial briefing.
- v. The Committee noted a Hansard transcript for the oral briefing on the 27 November 2024 from the Department Solicitors Office (DSO) on the work of the DSO.
- vi. The Committee noted Twenty-eighth Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules. No rules were referenced with relevance to the Committee.
- vii. The Committee noted a copy of the invitation from Co-operation Ireland, Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) and Pobal who are currently preparing to open two new PEACEPLUS grants schemes aimed at grassroots communities.
- viii. The Committee noted correspondence from Department of Finance regarding revisions to the Labour Market Statistics for Northern Ireland.

Item 5.24 - Department of Finance - Fujitsu, Integr8 and NOVA Contracts.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to go into **closed session** at 5.02pm to discuss an Annex relating to Item 5.24 of Matters Arising: Department of Finance - Fujitsu, Integr8 and NOVA Contracts.

Eóin Tennyson left the meeting at 5.07pm and returned 5.10pm.

The Committee moved into **open session** at 5.10pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department to provide further information on the following areas:

- To ask if the PSNI contracts are anything to do with the data breach and if so what remedial work if any is being done;
- To ask why information provided in relation to the PSNI contracts was marked restricted;
- To assess if a review has happened as nothing has been drawn down yet for the Health and Social Care Business Services Organisation Technology Framework Agreement;
- To ask if the Department considers Fujitsu run systems safe and reliable;
- To ask if they are planning to review payments to Fujitsu;
- To ask if they have they launched or are considering launching an independent review on the volume of contracts awarded to Fujitsu;
- To seeking clarity on the role of DoF and other Departments on the management of contracts for the NICS;
- To request an updated oral briefing from CPD regarding Fujitsu contracts; and
- To follow up with the Education Committee an item of outstanding correspondence regarding the Education Authority ceasing of a Fujitsu contract.

11. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the Forward Work Programme, as drafted.

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

12. Any Other Business

None.

13. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 15 January 2025 at 2:00pm Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:19pm.

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

15 January 2025