



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Finance and Personnel

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Draft Budget 2015-16 — Departmental Spending Plan:  
Department of Finance and Personnel

19 November 2014



**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Do you agree that it is particularly damaging to the reputation of the Department that this is happening regularly?

**Ms Worth:** This is probably not a particularly regular occurrence for the finance division. We have had a relatively good record up until this time, and I attribute this delay to the challenging nature of the paper that we are trying to produce, particularly in the timescale available to us.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** For the Department in general, on a number of occasions, members have not received papers until the last minute and in accordance with procedures. In my view, that is not tenable.

**Ms Worth:** The permanent secretary made it quite clear last week that he agreed with you and that he would make every effort to improve the Department's performance in that respect in the future. Certainly, I will do everything in my power to ensure that my papers reach your desk as soon as possible.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Is it a resource issue?

**Ms Worth:** With this, it is not so much a resource issue as the scale of the task in the time frame available.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Paragraph 5.2 of the draft Budget states:

*"Ministers will seek to publish more detailed breakdowns of proposed expenditure on their departmental websites."*

When will DFP publish such a breakdown for this Committee to scrutinise?

**Ms Worth:** As I say, we are making every effort to get ourselves to that point, and we will do that as soon as we possibly can.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** When?

**Ms Worth:** I am not in a position to give you an exact time frame at the moment.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Can you give us a broad time frame?

**Ms Worth:** As I say, we are working on it. It is my top priority, so I am doing everything I can to get that —

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** If it is your top priority, you should have a broad time frame for when it can be done.

**Ms Worth:** It does not depend only on me. Obviously, there are many review levels in the Department in producing a paper. It is particularly important that we get something like this right and that we do not publish something that subsequently emerges to be unachievable or unreliable.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** What assurance can you give the Committee that all Ministers will do this when the Finance Minister has not done it?

**Ms Worth:** I am not really in a position to answer that question. I can do only what I can for the DFP paper.

**Mr D Bradley:** Would the paper that you were to have had for today normally go to the Minister for his approval?

**Ms Worth:** Yes.

**Mr D Bradley:** Has it gone to the Minister?

**Ms Worth:** It goes through a number of processes in the Department in order to arrive at the Committee, so it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the specific steps that it has gone through at this stage.

**Mr D Bradley:** Why not?

**Ms Worth:** It is in progress.

**Mr D Bradley:** Surely it is not a top secret issue. Has it gone to the Minister or not?

**Ms Worth:** It is undergoing review in the Department.

**Mr D Bradley:** If you will not give members the information that we need, how are we to know where the delay is in the system?

**Ms Worth:** That is an internal departmental matter for us to work through and ensure that we make every effort to get papers to you on time.

**Mr D Bradley:** It is, however, also the role of the Committee to ensure that we get the information that we need in a timely fashion.

**Ms Worth:** Yes, I understand that.

**Mr D Bradley:** So we expect cooperation from the Department.

**Ms Worth:** Yes.

**Mr D Bradley:** We do not seem to be getting it today. Anyway, I will leave it at that.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Brigitte, given that you are here, can you give us a view on the research briefing note on lines of questioning that is in members' packs today? The Department's deadline is tomorrow to issue a written response to that. Can we have an assurance that that will happen by tomorrow's deadline?

**Ms Worth:** I have not been dealing with that case, so I am unsighted, to be honest with you, on where that is at the moment.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Are you aware of the research briefing note?

**Ms Worth:** Yes, I am aware of it.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** How can you be aware of it and not know whether the Department is preparing to respond in time?

**Ms Worth:** I have been asked for a part-input to the response, so I am aware of it in that respect. When I was asked for that, I indicated that I would be happy to provide an oral response at the session on the Budget paper. I have not yet been asked for any further information on that. As I say, I am unsighted as to exactly where that is in the process in the Department.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Has your input been signed off yet?

**Ms Worth:** As I say, I offered an oral input rather than a written one, and I have not yet been informed that that is a problem.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Are you expecting the Department to come back and ask for a written input before tomorrow's deadline?

**Ms Worth:** I suspect that that may be a logical consequence of the fact that I have not been able to provide you with an oral input today. Should such a request issue to me, I have something available to go within that time frame.

**Mr McCallister:** On some occasions, I have sympathy for officials having to come and tell Committees that they are not prepared. However, Chair, I have to say that any sympathy went out the window when I heard the response to the Deputy Chair's question. Do I understand correctly that the paper has been prepared but has not been signed off yet?

**Ms Worth:** There is an initial draft, but the development of such papers is an iterative process, and it is not uncommon for there to be several levels of review when a paper is revised and rewritten. We have not yet reached the point of there being a final paper.

**Mr McCallister:** I accept that the paper goes through reviews and redrafts. The simple question is this: how far along that process is it? Is it with the Minister — yes or no?

**Ms Worth:** It is in the middle of the process of being reviewed and redrafted.

**Mr McCallister:** So it is not yet at ministerial level. The blockage is not with the Minister.

**Ms Worth:** It is not. The Minister has not yet received a final draft that he is content with.

**Mr McCallister:** So he has seen the initial draft. That is the point. It is in that process. The Minister has seen the draft, but there is a blockage at that point at which it has not been signed off on.

**Ms Worth:** As I said, it needs to be redrafted. It needs to go through that iterative process and, potentially, a series of redrafts before it is at the point at which the Minister will be content to issue it to the Committee.

**Mr McCallister:** It seems to me that that is where the blockage is; the Minister has not signed it off. We do not have a paper. We are already very far behind in this process. I accept that it is a very difficult paper to prepare and a very difficult Budget for us to scrutinise, but the constant delays are not making any of our jobs any easier. Have we a time frame for when the paper will be signed off? Will we be in a position to do it next Wednesday?

**Ms Worth:** We are working on it as our top priority. We need to make sure that the paper that comes to you can withstand scrutiny, as I am sure you will appreciate.

**Mr McCallister:** I do, but I am concerned that it will not be signed off, and we will head into the Christmas recess without it. Uncertainty about what Departments are going to come up with is probably a concern that is also being highlighting for other Committees. To not have a time frame in the short window that we have to deal with and scrutinise this is totally unacceptable. I could accept it if you were saying that you needed another week, but you cannot even tell us that today.

**Ms Boyle:** My question was answered when you said that the written response should be available by tomorrow. Mr Sterling was here last week. He apologised profusely about the same issue that we are discussing today. Brigitte, you have drawn the short straw and are the bearer of the bad news today. When Mr Sterling was here last week, I am sure that he would have known that the initial draft would not be ready when it should be, give or take a few days. Our work here is very important. We set out an agenda for the issues that we are dealing with. It is unfortunate that we did not know about this earlier than today, this morning or late yesterday afternoon. If we had known, we could have put something else on our agenda, because all our business is very important. We are coming up to the Christmas recess, and there is quite a bit on our agenda to get through. That is unfortunate, and it is unfortunate, Brigitte, that you have drawn the short straw to come and give us that bad news, given that you are the senior finance director. Was the permanent secretary aware of the issue? Maybe he knew full well that this item of business might not be before us today.

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** Brigitte, I echo that sympathy. This is a bit like a secret service committee. I was not sure what Committee I had landed in when we got no answers to anything, although I think that we have now answered the question put by the Deputy Chair: the Minister does have a draft response. Is that correct? The Minister has a document.

**Ms Worth:** He has had a document, and he has indicated that he is not content with it. Therefore, he is waiting for final —

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** Before you came in, Brigitte, we discussed how short the timeline for consultation is and how many bites of the cherry the Committee will have. I presume that we are now losing at least another week. When the permanent secretary, Mr Sterling, was here last week, I said that he was doing a sterling job. Last week, he had one late report, and this week, he has no report. So I have to withdraw my remark: even by my estimation, that is not a sterling job.

**Mr Weir:** You turn so quickly.

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** In my view, this is what is unacceptable: not that you, Brigitte, had to come and break the bad news but that the permanent secretary is not here. There is an old business adage: a bit of bad news — break it yourself. I do not know where he is this morning. No doubt he is working on this draft that we cannot see, but the permanent secretary really should do the Chair the courtesy of contacting him and, when possible, give a little more detail about why the Committee has been stood up, if not snubbed, in this way. I do not know, Chair, whether that has happened. Perhaps the permanent secretary has been in touch with you.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** No.

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** I presume that the man at the very top — the Minister — has not been in touch either.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** No, not yet.

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** As part of our sympathy for you, Brigitte, I think that it is unfair that the permanent secretary did not take the time to come to the Committee and let us down gently himself rather than sending you. You can take that message back to him.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** When Sammy Wilson was Minister, I do not think that we had this problem to the same extent that we have had since Simon Hamilton took office. Brigitte, not to flog a dead horse, but is it the case that it is the Minister's office that is frustrating this process?

**Ms Worth:** I cannot comment on that. I can comment only on the papers that I have prepared. I know that this is only the second time that I have been at the Committee with a late paper, and this is the first time that there have been no papers. So I have not seen any marked change in what has happened with the papers that I have experience of.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Are you finding that, when you send papers to the Minister's office, they are coming back at the same rate as they were when his predecessor was in post?

**Ms Worth:** In my experience, I have not noticed a particular change in the rate of late papers.

**Mr McQuillan:** Chair, I do not see where you are coming from. I do not see how it would be in the Minister's interest to withhold this paper from us. Surely he would be looking for our support on it, so the sooner we have it, get through it and agree or disagree it, the sooner he would know where he stands. I cannot see why we are badgering a witness. It would be different if it were the permanent secretary; we should have a go at him. It should not be Brigitte; she is here simply with a message, and she has done fairly well in what she has said. I do not think that there is any point in labouring it.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** I partly agree with Adrian. The fact is, however, that we have to get to the bottom of this because it is a recurring problem.

**Mr McQuillan:** Let us have a go at the permanent secretary or the Minister.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** The blame does lie with the Minister because he is accountable for his Department. Hopefully, the Minister will be before us in the next few weeks, so if that is not in the pipeline, perhaps we should bring it forward to ensure that he answers questions on this issue.

Brigitte, thank you —

**Mr Girvan:** Just before we leave the subject, I want to go back to the point that there is a missed opportunity here. The timeline has shifted a further week, which might mean holding a special Committee meeting to deal with this one item of business. I am fearful of it dropping off the end of the

Christmas recess, after which we run into difficulties in getting everything through the Committees and the Assembly, with everything else that has to be done, before March. Rather than creating a problem, I would appreciate it if the Committee could show its willingness to put its shoulder to the wheel and not delay the process. If that means holding a special Committee meeting, and you, Chair, calling the Committee to meet on another day, even on a Tuesday lunchtime or whatever, I am keen to do that. However, that does not take away from asking for an explanation for the delay. We should show our willingness to hold an additional meeting to allow progress so that we cannot be seen to be holding things up.

**Mr D Bradley:** I do not believe that any of the members here were badgering the witness. We are here to get information —

**Mr McQuillan:** Yes, but that question was asked three or four times.

**Mr D Bradley:** Sorry, I am speaking, if you do not mind. We are here to get information from witnesses, and we are here to ask questions. If asking questions is badgering, we may all be silent.

**Mr McQuillan:** That might be better sometimes.

**Mr D Bradley:** Certainly in your case.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** OK, members. Brigitte, the session will take place next week, and we should have the papers in good time.

**Ms Worth:** I will do everything in my power to ensure that that is the case.