Northern Ireland
Assembly

# COMMITTEE FOR
# FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

# OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

## Review of the Financial Process

21 September 2011

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**
Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Judith Cochrane
Mr Leslie Cree
Mr Paul Girvan
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Paul Maskey
Mr Mitchel McLaughlin

**Witnesses:**

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| Mr Michael Brennan | ) | Department of Finance and Personnel |
| Ms Agnes Lennon | ) | |

**The Deputy Chairperson:**
I welcome Mike Brennan, the head of the central expenditure division of the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), and Agnes Lennon, who is also an official in that division. I refer members to the briefing paper in their information packs and to the recommendations in the research paper 'Review of Financial Process: considerations for improving the budget process'.

The Committee requested that the five key recommendations in the research paper be taken forward by DFP in tandem with the Executive's review. Those recommendations were that a Budget calendar should be specified in advance to allow time for adequate consultation and that there should be a strategic phase in advance of the publication of the draft Budget to allow the Assembly to debate revenue issues and spending priorities. In addition, a formal stage should be included for reconsidering the Budget in the light of emerging pressures and for considering developments that may affect allocations in-year and across years. It was also recommended that there should be detailed documentation that is produced in good time and that the framework for a new Budget process should have a statutory footing.

Those recommendations were in keeping with the proposals from the previous Committee's inquiry into strengthening the Assembly's role in budgetary scrutiny. Last June, DFP advised the Committee that many of the conclusions and recommendations from the previous Committee's report could be addressed within the existing terms of reference for the Executive's review.

I invite Michael and Agnes to make their opening statements.

**Mr Michael Brennan (Department of Finance and Personnel):**
I will begin with a few comments that pick up on what emerged from the Research and Information Service briefing paper, which was discussed earlier. We may be able to provide some further insight to help members with what are quite important issues.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**
Two issues emerged: the 25% of expenditure that is not approved by the Assembly, and the pros and cons of gross and net reporting.

**Mr Brennan:**
OK, I will provide some insight into the complexities of those two issues. I will also make the point that we, as DFP officials, share the Committee's exasperation at the length of time that it has taken to progress the review. We have had the terms of reference for the review sitting with the Executive for many, many, many months, and we got the final green light to progress it only in February 2010.

Since then, we have had a lot of work progressing on a range of issues, and we advised the Committee in June of where we were. Since then, and over the summer holiday period, we had meetings with several Departments and the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) about progressing the review. We have also engaged with the Departmental Solicitor's Office (DSO) on a number of issues to do with the legislative impacts of the review.

We noted the recommendations of the Finance Committee's June paper, and we have had subsequent discussions with the Committee Clerk and, indeed, the Research and Information Service team. With regard to the process, our plan now is to issue a consultation paper to key stakeholders on the initial proposals in the next few weeks. Those key stakeholders would obviously be the Committees, the Audit Office and the Departmental Solicitor's Office. We will do that just to take their views on the key issues as they emerge in the review, and we will invite them to make their responses to us by the end of November.

Obviously, this Committee is at the centre of that engagement, because it really is the conduit for the Assembly's view on the best way to progress. So, we especially welcome its views. We will then take those views to the Finance Minister and ask him to present a paper to the Executive on the way forward.

Agnes will go into more detail on the gross versus net issue and the 25% capital control issue. However, if we look at international best practice, we will see that reports on the way forward from, for example, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) tend to say that best practice for national sovereign Governments is fiscal policy management. There are a number of reasons why that is not really appropriate in the Northern Ireland case. For example, this is a devolved Administration where 90-odd per cent of the Budget allocated comes from the Treasury through the Barnett formula. In addition, the public expenditure rules are imposed on the three devolved Administrations by the Treasury. So, there are significant constraints, and the IMF research, which is discussed in the briefing paper, would not actually apply.

A key paper to look at is the Treasury's statement of funding policy for the devolved Administrations. That sets the framework for identifying the discretion that, for example, Mitchel talked about in the previous session with regard to introducing new taxes and revenue-raising powers. That paper is the starting point in finding out what flexibility the Executive and Assembly may have for raising new revenue.

On the issue about whether the review should recommend a gross or a net approach, it is important to highlight that a key aim of this financial review is the need for greater transparency and the ability to align closely Budgets, Estimates and accounts. That is particularly the case for the Committee, given the comments that it has relayed to us. There are some significant advantages in moving to voting on a net basis, and Agnes will set some of those out.

At the minute, we vote gross, but it is important to make the point that the Assembly imposes limits on the income that Departments accrue. So, it is not as though Departments are suddenly left with complete and utter discretion as to what they do with the income, how much they raise and whether it is valid. For example, valid income is determined in the ambit that the Assembly approves in the Estimates for Departments.

**Ms Agnes Lennon (Department of Finance and Personnel):**
I appreciate the Committee's concerns, and I am glad to note that it has fears about the change of control that we will probably propose from gross to net. That probably means that the Assembly will have weakened control and accountability. On the other hand, there are many measures that we can put in place to counteract that. As Mike said, one of those measures would be to put into the ambit and the legislation that you vote in the Budget Act a list of the types of income that a Department could bring in. That Department would have to live within those types. If that were exceeded, it would be an Excess Vote situation, and that Department would be accountable to the Assembly.

There are some other means that we could introduce to mitigate and control that. At the moment, the gross, the income and the net are shown in part 2 of the Estimates. We would continue to do that so that the Assembly would be fully informed of the income against each spending area. Even though it may not be voted as a limit, that information would be readily available to the Assembly.

The Northern Ireland budgetary framework is unique in that we run monitoring rounds, which does not happen in the rest of the United Kingdom. In a monitoring round, the existing monitoring rules mean that any additional unplanned income that Departments bring in must be declared as a reduced requirement. I think that that is quite right. Some people touched on maximising income. However, if you let a Department bring in additional income, the Executive, from a central perspective, may want to spend that additional income on something other than what that Department considered important. So, the budgeting framework in Northern Ireland already sets a fairly tight control on accruing resources or income. Again, that would mitigate the effects of moving from gross to net.

As well as that framework, there is a lot of other guidance out there. For example, 'Managing Public Money' sets out guidelines about fees and charges, which one member referred to. Also, given that Departments are statutory bodies, if a Department were to bring in any new type of income, legislation would have to be brought to the Assembly anyhow. Therefore, the Assembly would have total control over that new type of income, as is happening with the plastic bag tax. It is not that you would be giving up total control of all income; far from it. A lot of controls would still be in place that would mitigate the effects of moving from gross to net. As Mike said, the main reason would be that we budget on a net basis, and you are going to have a huge misalignment if you do not vote on a net basis. One of the complaints that we have heard from Assembly Members is that the Budget document and the Estimates do not tally, which they would if we vote on a net basis.

**Mr Girvan:**

Thank you for that information. However, it differs somewhat from what we get from Whitehall. The Westminster Committee met to discuss this matter, and it advised going down the route of the gross approach. I appreciate where we are coming from here. I am seeing the positives of the situation, but what would be the effect if, for argument's sake, some receipts were received late in the financial year? At that point, we would already be through part of our stage. If some money came into a Department late in the year as a capital receipt for the disposal of an asset or whatever, would it be included? We would be going through the process of setting our Estimates or whatever we were dealing with on our spend for the next year. Could that be carried forward if it comes in late in that year? What way would that work?

**Ms Lennon:**

Even at the moment with voting gross and setting a limit on the accruing resources, if a Department brought in any receipts above that amount, obviously we are not going to not allow Departments to bring in additional receipts. We would encourage it.

At the moment, that would go back to the centre — the Consolidated Fund. Voting gross or net would not make any great difference. If Departments brought income in quite late, such as in the last four or five weeks of the year after the monitoring rounds and after the spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) and the Budget Act had been passed, they could possibly spend it in the Department, but —

**Mr Girvan:**

Do you believe that going over to the net approach would produce a more realistic assessment of the actual spend?

**Ms Lennon:**

It would, but we would show the gross and the net income figures in the Estimate. The information would still be there, but we do not propose to diminish those in any way.

**Mr Brennan:**

It would mean that, when the Budget document is produced by the Executive and validated by the Assembly, the meaning of the allocations for the Budget process and what is replicated in the Estimates could be seen in a much more transparent way.

**Mr Girvan:**

Does the monitoring round process that we go through in Northern Ireland give us the safeguards that would allow us to move ahead?

**Ms Lennon:**

We have much more control, yes.

**Mr Cree:**

I think that Michael has hit on the main point. The essential issue must be that everything should be easily understood without the need to refer back to legislation to determine what is in this or that clause. Everything should be in one set of papers so that a middle accountancy student could understand it. That is the purpose of the exercise. We must make things as simple as we can. We must avoid jargon and have clear notes on where everything is. That is what we want.

**Ms Lennon:**

That is our aim.

**Mr Brennan:**

Agnes has already started work with her supply teams for the Departments on constructing what a new Estimate may look like under the new approach. That would make it much easier to follow the logic of the whole process.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

I am sure that we would all welcome that.

**Mr McLaughlin:**

That is quite helpful. Although I am frustrated that the process has taken so long, I appreciate how complex it is. It would appear from Michael and Agnes's report that there is an end product. There may be some benefit in considering detailed briefings or even training workshops for MLAs who are interested in the subject matter, particularly on the new system as it comes through, because we would want it to be given it a fair wind.

There are questions that we could speculate about, but I am trying to resist that temptation, because you could think of a number of what-if scenarios. One thing that is certain to confront us is the need to generate new revenues. The implications, if any, should individual Ministers bring schemes forward, should be explained in some detail. I can see that, in some circumstances, that may involve a fairly complex consideration of issues, perhaps involving European competition law in some instances or Treasury rules in others. I am not sure of the limits; we will deal with a paper subsequently on the Budget exchange mechanism. The limits are quite tight, and I wonder what would happen to some of the schemes, particularly asset disposal schemes, given that they all have a certain elasticity. We cannot just predict that we can do this when we hope to, and we have already found that out with the asset disposal process. So, the exercise will not be without its complications.

To finish on the point I started with, it will be important that we facilitate Members' understanding of the new process. It will certainly enhance participation and a sense of ownership and responsibility for the decisions that are made.

**Mr Brennan:**

As I understand it, the Committee has organised a session with all MLAs for 18 October.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

That is correct.

**Mr Brennan:**
We are going to do a presentation in two parts. The first part will be a summary presentation on the public expenditure system, similar to the one that we gave to the Committee in early June, and the second part will be on the details of the financial review. We will have to go into considerable detail in the presentation on the public expenditure system. I referred to the Treasury's statement on funding policy, because that defines the discretion that the Executive have on revenue-raising powers. As you know, Ministers and the Budget review group are looking at that.

The Executive have significant discretion on where they can raise revenue, whether that is through a plastic bag tax or car parking charges. The difficulty comes when you get into excepted matters and fiscal powers, such as air passenger duty and corporation tax. Then you are into, for example, issues over EU state aids and the Azores judgement. That is where the complexities come in.

The Executive and Assembly have a wide range of powers for revenue raising, as opposed to fiscal powers. It is important to distinguish between them, and we will do that in the presentation on 18 October. We will also try to draw out in our presentation for MLAs the importance of issues such as gross versus net when it comes to the financial review.

**Mr McLaughlin:**
An issue occurred to me when Agnes was speaking, and the plastic bag tax is an example of it. I was thinking of cases where we pass legislation that gives effect to the Assembly's mind. I presume that, in subsequent Budgets, the bag tax could change and could go either up or down, but that that would not require legislation. So, there is the initial consideration about the Assembly's needing to legislate to do certain things, but there is then the situation with what happens subsequently in other Budget rounds. I assume that you would use the existing legislation, but you may vary the rates.

**Mr Brennan:**
The principle is similar to what we do with the regional rate. That varies on a year-to-year basis, and the revenue stream varies accordingly. Similarly, with things such as MOT charges, the decision that the Department of the Environment (DOE) takes on that determines the revenue stream that the Executive accrue.

**Mr P Maskey:**

I am new to the Committee, and I am trying to get my head round some of the issues, so this might sound like a silly question. I take it that legislation for the plastic bag tax is required because you are asking the private sector to collect the money. Is that correct? The private sector has to pass the charge on to individuals, because if you go into a shop and are given a bag, you have to pay for it, so you are asking the private sector to implement the measures. If a Department or an arm's-length body of a Department were introducing a similar charge, would legislation be needed in that case?

**Ms Lennon:**

Northern Ireland Departments are statutory bodies, so they cannot carry out any service without the statutory authority to do so. They must have a legislative basis for delivering the service, no matter what it is.

**Mr Brennan:**

DOE does not have the legislative ability to levy the bag tax, because the relevant legislation has not gone through the Assembly.

**Mr P Maskey:**

So, legislation has to be made for every revenue-raising measure. Is that correct?

**Mr McLaughlin:**

Unless it is already covered.

**Ms Lennon:**

Exactly; unless the measure has a statutory basis already.

**Mr P Maskey:**

Can one piece of legislation not do away with all that?

**Ms Lennon:**

Your Departments are statutory bodies, and they must have statutory authority to deliver every service. A Minister cannot just decide to deliver a service.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

Have you finished on that topic?

**Ms Lennon:**

Yes. Perhaps there is just one issue to touch on. The income that Departments can keep and the income that we are talking about voting has to have related spend; income can be brought in and kept by a Department only if there is related expenditure. Otherwise, it goes to the Consolidated Fund.

**Mr Girvan:**

That last point helps to answer my question. Departments could increase charges for a function. In some cases, those charges could be used to cover up their inefficiencies with their bottom lines. I am wondering what mechanism could be put in place to ensure that that does not happen and that Departments are not increasing their revenue-generating powers to offset some of their inefficiencies.

**Mr McLaughlin:**

Do you think that could happen?

**Mr Girvan:**

Definitely; I have run a business.

**Ms Lennon:**

There are very strict rules on charging in ‘Managing Public Money’, as well as under the Treasury fees and charges guidance. At the most, that should be for full cost recovery. So there are already rules on that.

**Mr Girvan:**

My point is that they can say that it is for full cost recovery through whatever means possible. I can think of one instance in particular, which I would not be happy to raise here — I might raise it in Paul’s Committee later — where an over-inflated bureaucracy has been generated that costs a fortune to run and administer. Therefore, it has been deemed that, to cover that bureaucracy, are actual costs can be put forward and added on as a reasonable charge to the public. A mechanism is needed to ensure that the process is not being used to mask or cover inefficiency. By going down the net route, I wonder whether that would leave the opportunity to do that.

I appreciate that we are —

**Ms Lennon:**

I do not imagine that it would make any difference in that particular scenario, but the safeguards that are in place are that, for example, DFP Supply would have an interest in such cases, and the Assembly Committees would have a role in challenging that.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

What about the 25% of expenditure that is not approved by the Assembly? I understand from the research paper that that is mostly capital spend.

**Ms Lennon:**

A portion of it is capital spend, and another large portion is to do with non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs). The sum that the Assembly votes includes only the cash grant to the public body for that year, not the full resource consumption. The full spend and income of the arm's-length body is in the Budget, whereas in the Estimate, only the cash grant is voted. Bringing the NDPBs within the accounting boundary, which is a path that we would like to follow if it is acceptable to the Assembly and the Executive, would do away with quite a lot of that.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

Is that proposal in your consultation paper?

**Mr Brennan:**

That is the major difference, particularly where our earlier point about the lack of transparency between the Budget position and the Estimates is concerned.

**Mr Cree:**

You said "quite a lot". What about the others?

**Ms Lennon:**

I do not have the figures on that in front of me, I am afraid.

**Mr Cree:**

The aim is to do it all, is it not?

**Ms Lennon:**

Yes, I hope to align everything. The aim of the project is to align and vote absolutely everything, but I am not sure as yet whether we can do that for all areas of expenditure. Hopefully, however, that will be the case.

**Mr McLaughlin:**

Yes, you started that line of questioning, Deputy Chairperson. I am one behind you.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

I was going to move on to the consultation document.

**Mr McLaughlin:**

In that case, have all the causes of that gap in the Budget process been identified? The NDPBs are the major part of it, but there are other sources of that difficulty. Have they been identified and specified as well?

**Ms Lennon:**

Yes, they have. We are working on that, and that work will be ongoing over the next months. I will not say that, in the discussion paper that we will produce in October, we will have all the answers, but we will certainly work towards them over the next months. Areas such as the National Insurance fund, the social fund and the notional charging that we do across Departments will be investigated. We hope to get solutions to all those misalignments.

**Mr McLaughlin:**

It is probably important to remind ourselves that this important information was volunteered by these two officials at an earlier meeting. It has helped everyone to get their heads around just how difficult it is to take a comprehensive approach.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

At the beginning, when I introduced you, I outlined the recommendations from the research paper. Let me summarise them. The first was a Budget calendar, the second was a strategic phase and the third was the formal stage. The fourth was a detailed breakdown of expenditure plans, and the fifth was that the framework process should be set out in primary legislation. Does your consultation paper cover those five recommendations?

**Mr Brennan:**

We will address them, but I can give some initial observations on the complications that we see in them. For example, on the first issue of a Budget calendar, Scotland and Wales have a specific date set — I think they must have Budgets by 1 January. The difficulty that we have here is that we have commitments to engage in a public consultation process, but those do not exist in Scotland or Wales. I wonder how we would have addressed 1 January, say, as a set date by which a Budget had to be produced for the year just past, when, for example, the outcome of the UK national spending review was not announced until 20 October. Normally, DFP's ideal scenario for the timescale for a Budget is that there is a draft Budget by early September. However, the outcome of the UK spending review, which determines 95% of the resources for the Executive, was not announced until 20 October. That is what worries me about setting specific dates.

From our perspective, we would love the Committee to recommend setting a concrete date deadline. It focuses minds, because it means that you have to have something tabled at the Executive and on through. We would welcome a specific date, but I can see the complexities and the complications that would emerge either from a Treasury allocation as part of a national spending review or, shall we say, delay in the Executive.

The second recommendation relates to a strategic phase. The main benefit of having a strategic consideration of the Budget is that it sets out the main priorities and aims, and where allocations are going to be prioritised. Effectively, that should be the Programme for Government. There is a difficulty with specifying a strategic phase; for instance, where would we have been in this Budget if we had to formally wait for a Programme for Government?

It was also recommended that there should be a formal reconsideration stage of the Budget in the budgetary year. I suggest that we already have that, because, as Agnes mentioned, we have monitoring rounds. That is when the Executive strategically reallocate resources as reduced requirements come in or as pressures emerge in other Departments, for instance. The Executive reprioritise their resources. There used to be four such rounds, but there are three in-year strategic reconsiderations on the Budget now: June, October and January.

I agree that documentation should be made available in good time, and I do not see how anyone could dispute the logic of that. In many ways, this Committee's work is strategically important, because it allows us to relay views to our Minister and helps shape papers of his that go to the Executive. Many times in the past, our Minister has criticised his colleagues who did not make information available to the other Statutory Committees. So, I think that there is strong logic in that recommendation.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**
What about the final recommendation, which says that the budgetary process should be set out in primary legislation? Judging from what you said, I think that that might present you with difficulties.

**Ms Lennon:**
We, as officials, would like that, but we would also like to know the view of the Committee and the Assembly. When we issue the discussion paper, perhaps you would like to canvass other Committees' so that you can get a view across the Assembly. Is it the view of the Assembly and this Committee that you would like dates set in legislation? Or, is another option that Standing Orders should be amended to set specific dates? Or, is it the Assembly's view that you would have an agreement with the Executive? We, as officials, would love the calendar; we would love dates to be set in legislation. However, we have to be practical, but we would like to know the view and the will of the Assembly on that before we go to the Executive.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**
The Committee has not come to a final conclusion, and we have not made recommendations to the Assembly as yet. We are still at the stage of gathering information and research on the matter.

**Mr Girvan:**
Michael alluded to getting the information and final figures from Westminster. That is a key factor. We are tied until that information comes through. Is there a possibility of getting it any earlier in the day? If there is, we could sit down, work to that timetable and work back from it and set firm dates. I see that as a key factor in allowing us to set those dates.

**Mr Brennan:**

It is, but, unfortunately, you will be at the whim of whatever timing the UK Government want to impose on spending reviews. The spending review outcome is usually announced in July, but, in July this year, we realised that it would be late, so, in an attempt to assist the Executive and, indeed, the Committee, we produced forecasts, which we gave to the Committee, on what we thought the review would deliver. In past years, even when the Treasury gave us the spending review outcome in July, the timing to get the Executive to agree a draft Budget in September was still very tight. October was completely illogical for our internal timescales, and the Treasury took no cognisance of our difficulties. I do not know how you could force the UK Government to commit to a formal agreement on delivery.

**Mr Girvan:**

You mentioned the model that they work to in Scotland, but they have different powers. Is that correct?

**Mr Brennan:**

They also do not have the same commitments to make on, for example, consultation processes.

**Mr Girvan:**

The benign dictatorship comes in here.

**Mr McLaughlin:**

Differing priorities in the Westminster Government mean that those difficulties could occur any year. If we were looking at the Budget process itself, I wonder what the merits would be of having a four-year Budget process with a Budget performance review in the intervening years. That could review the Budget and the Programme for Government. It is not that controversial for an incoming Government to end up implementing the outgoing Government's Programme for Government for the first year or maybe even the first 18 months. Therefore, a four-year Programme for Government cycle that reflects the four-year term here but that does not kick in until year 2 — it runs into year 1 of the subsequent term — would give you some degree of control over the impact of external factors, such as different priorities applying in Westminster.

At the moment, we just bob about like a cork in the water; if they do something, we have to firefight. Getting involved, understanding and being transparent and accountable are sound notional ideas, but complex issues become even more complex and confusing when external factors must be balanced. For example, I am not sure that we need three monitoring rounds, and I was never convinced that we needed four. To all intents and purposes, some of them are useful only because they force Departments to get their books in order before they are looked at and because they encourage Departments to be up front with performance figures and spending profiles. However, that could be done equally well with two monitoring rounds, with the result that space could be freed up for an in-term Budget review process that could adapt and adjust to changing conditions. Therefore, while looking at the timeliness of the process, we should consider, in a fairly open-minded way, what would maximise the Assembly's ownership of the process.

I do not think that each new intake of MLAs and Ministers taking a ground-zero approach gives us the type of control, continuity and strategic perspective that we need. Maybe a minimum of a one-year overlap would make your reforms more applicable and manageable, as well as allowing for a strategic perspective, because you really need to look two or three terms ahead by taking a 10- or 12-year perspective.

**Mr Brennan:**

Yes, particularly on the capital side where infrastructure development is concerned.

The other complication that you talked about is the four-year cycle here. However, this was the first year in which the UK delivered a four-year spending review— normally, it is three years — and the expectation is that they will stick to that going forward.

**Mr McLaughlin:**

They could change it again.

**Mr Brennan:**

Indeed. I agree with your point about monitoring rounds. Logic suggests that we need only two monitoring rounds, and, if that were to be the case, you would go for October and January, which would tie in with the final SSEs. The October round would be a mid-year review. In effect, you would have all the resources, and you would have to address all the issues from the end of the previous financial year and whatever reduced requirements and pressures that would have emerged in the first six months. Therefore, it could be quite a strategic assessment.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**
OK, thanks. Is it the plan to launch the consultation paper on Tuesday 18 October?

**Ms Lennon:**
Yes, we hope to issue it that week.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**
So, will it be available to the MLAs during that briefing?

**Ms Lennon:**
Yes, we will have it for the MLAs at that session. We hope to issue it to the Departments, the Audit Office and the other key stakeholders. It is more of a discussion paper that will contain some initial recommendations, which we would like responses to.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**
Will you give us a flavour of the type of issues for discussion that will be highlighted in that paper?

**Ms Lennon:**
It will deal with the process that we have been discussing here and with the recommendations from this Committee, so it will deal with the whole Budget process. We will deal in some detail with the whole misalignment, which is probably not of particular interest to the Assembly or the Committee but of more interest to the Departments and certainly to the Audit Office. It will also address the issue of bringing NDPBs into the accounting boundaries. As I said, the Audit Office and Departments are particularly interested in that.

We will deal with the vote issue, that is, the pros and cons of whether we move from a request for resources to voting the Budget limits of resources and capital, that is, departmental expenditure limits (DEL) and annual managed expenditure (AME). We will look at the net versus gross issue and make a recommendation on that. Publications will attach a sample Estimate and a sample new resource account.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

When you say that that is a “discussion document”, does that mean that it will not follow the usual consultation format, which affords people the opportunity to respond to various sections and raise questions and so on?

**Ms Lennon:**

On the use of the term “consultation”, I do not want anyone to think that it is a public consultation. It is not, and we will not be following the 12-week format. It is really just a consultation with key stakeholders — Departments, the Audit Office, the Committee and across the Assembly.

**Mr Brennan:**

It is important to make the point that the issues here are so incredibly complex that all of us, including key stakeholders, are struggling to get our minds round how to take some of these things forward. From our perspective, the critical stakeholder is this Committee and its relaying of the Assembly’s views. We need your views before we can even go to our Minister to shape this. That is why there is a six or seven-week window to elicit views from your Committee, the Audit Office and departmental finance teams.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

Thank you very much. I remind members that the information briefing for MLAs on the financial process will be on Tuesday 18 October in the Long Gallery. Is a time set for that?

**The Committee Clerk:**

There is the possibility of lunch at around 12.45 pm, with the briefing to start about 1.15 pm. That will be firmed up.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

Are members content with that?

*Members indicated assent.*

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

OK. I thank the witnesses very much.