



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

COMMITTEE FOR THE ECONOMY

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

11 MARCH 2020

ROOM 29, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

10:00am

Present: Dr Caoímhe Archibald (Chairperson)
Ms Sinéad McLaughlin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Gordon Dunne MBE
Mr Gary Middleton
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Christopher Stalford
Mr John Stewart
Ms Claire Sugden

In Attendance: Mr Peter Hall (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Sinead Kelly (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Mr Michael Greer (Clerical Supervisor)
Mr Thomas Manning (Clerical Officer)

Apologies: Mr Stewart Dickson

The meeting began at 10:07am in open session

1. Apologies

As noted above.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: the Committee agreed the draft Minutes of the meeting on 4th March 2020.

3. Chairpersons Business

The Chairperson referred Members to correspondence from the Minister to the Chairperson regarding the decision by Flybe to file for insolvency. The Chairperson informed Members of arrangements for the Chairperson to meet with the Chief Executive of the George Best Belfast City Airport that afternoon.

Agreed: the Chairperson to meet with the Chief Executive and update the Committee on the meeting. The Chairperson to address and seek clarification, at the meeting, on the issues faced by the staff of Flybe.

Agreed: that the Committee write to Treasury and the Department for Transport for an update on the ongoing reviews into Air Passenger Duty and Regional Air Connectivity and highlight to Treasury that the Committee has stated that there should not be an impact on the block grant.

The Chairperson referred Members to correspondence to the Chairperson from Queen's University Belfast requesting that the Committee sponsor the 2020 Queen's University Vice-Chancellor's Research Prizes event.

Agreed: that the Committee is content to sponsor the event.

The Chairperson referred Members to correspondence from FinTech Northern Ireland to the Chairperson offering to brief the Committee and outlining upcoming events.

Agreed: to schedule a briefing from FinTech and consider invitations, when received, to the events planned as part of UK Fintech week during 20th to 24th April 2020 and the UK National Network Fintech Symposium in Belfast City Hall on 3rd June 2020.

The Chairperson asked Members to consider the Committee laying a Motion on Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) before the Assembly.

Agreed: the Committee will lay a Motion in the Business Office, the wording of the motion to be agreed through correspondence with the Clerk.

The Chairperson informed Members of a partial closure of Trinity College in Dublin due to a case of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

Agreed: to write to the university and college authorities in Northern Ireland to inquire about their contingency plans and to also write to trade unions and student unions asking for their views and concerns on the potential for campus closures in Northern Ireland.

Claire Sugden joined the meeting at 10:15am

4. Oral Briefing by the Department: Energy Strategy

The Officials joined the meeting at 10.18am

Members received a briefing from:

Mr Richard Rodgers, Head of Energy Group, Department for the Economy (DfE)
Mr Thomas Byrne, Head of Energy Strategy, DfE
Ms Meabh Cormacain, Energy Division, DfE

The key issues discussed included the development of the Energy Strategy; to achieve net zero carbon over the next 30 years; issues effecting energy consumers; the use of energy in relation to efficiency, heat, power and transport.

Christopher Stalford joined the meeting at 10:19am

Christopher Stalford left the meeting at 10:47am

Christopher Stalford returned to the meeting at 10.54am

Gordon Dunne left the meeting at 11:03am

Gordon Dunne returned to the meeting at 11.09am

The Officials left the meeting at 11.34am

The Committee considered a draft invitation, agenda and list of invitees for the Committee's Energy Strategy Short Inquiry event on 29th April 2020.

Agreed: Members agreed the draft invitation, agenda and list of invitees.

5. Oral Briefing by the Department: Project Stratum

The Officials joined the meeting at 11.35am

Members received a briefing from:

Ms Geraldine Fee, Director of Tourism, Telecoms, Minerals & Petroleum, DfE
Mr Nigel Robbins, Director, Project Stratum, DfE
Mr Eamon Blaney, Telecoms Branch, DfE
Mr Trevor Forsythe, Telecoms Branch, DfE

Key issues discussed included the background of Project Stratum, its target intervention area, comparison to other regions in the UK and the current progress of the project.

Agreed: the Committee to ascertain the status of the short report, mentioned in the briefing, examining the delivery of two of the most recent projects with a view to communicating with the NI Audit Office on the report, on its completion.

John Stewart left the meeting at 12:12pm

Gary Middleton left the meeting at 12:16pm

The Officials left the meeting at 12.18pm

The Committee meeting moved to closed session at 12:18pm.

6. Oral Briefing by the Renewable Heat Association Northern Ireland (RHANI)

The representatives joined the meeting at 12.20pm

Members received a briefing from:

Mr Andrew Trimble, Executive Chair, RHANI

Mr John Martin, Association Member, RHANI

Mr Damian Carey, Association Member, RHANI

Mr Sean McCloskey, Association Member, RHANI

Key issues discussed included impact of the closure of the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scheme and the impact of the Northern Ireland (Regional Rates and Energy) Act 2019.

Agreed: the Committee will consider the issues raised in the briefing with regard to the publication of the RHI Inquiry report at the end of the week.

John Stewart returned to the meeting at 12:20pm

Gary Middleton returned to the meeting at 12:21pm

Sinead McLaughlin left the meeting at 12:40pm

Sinead McLaughlin returned to the meeting at 12.44pm

The representatives left the meeting at 12.50pm

The Committee meeting moved to open session at 12:52pm.

7. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a copy of correspondence from the Minister to the Minister of State for international Trade.

Agreed: to write to the Department that the Committee be informed of any further correspondence with the Minister of State.

Agreed: to forward the Committee's response to the Lords EU Internal Market Sub-Committee Short Inquiry on Level Playing Field and State Aid to the Minister of State for International Trade.

Noted: an oral statement from the Minister of Health regarding the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

8. SL1 – The Employment Rights (Increase of Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020

Members considered SL1 The Employment Rights (Increase of Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020.

Agreed: that the Committee is content with the policy implications of the proposed legislation.

9. Correspondence

Noted: correspondence from the Committee for Finance advising the Committee that Trading Standards Service is now investigating the issue of those businesses who signed up to plasma screen advertising with a company that subsequently collapsed.

Noted: correspondence from the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance (NITA) on an urgent Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) tourism summit that had taken place the previous day.

Noted: correspondence from the Utility Regulator welcoming Firmus Energy's 21.15% tariff reduction for domestic and small business consumers from 1st April 2020.

Members considered correspondence from the Labour Relations Agency (LRA) who will brief the Committee on 3rd June 2020.

Agreed: to seek briefings from NIC-ICTU, the Law Centre NI, and the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) on Brexit related issues such as employment rights and other rights.

Noted: correspondence from Tourism NI outlining its priorities and challenges for 2020.

Noted: a response from the NI Audit Office to the Committee's letter regarding Invest NI funding to Wrightbus, informing the Committee that it intends to review these issues as part of its 2019-20 Financial Audit of Invest NI.

Noted: correspondence from an individual regarding the Presbyterian Mutual Society and the role of the previous Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and that the correspondence was also sent to the Public Accounts Committee.

Members considered correspondence from International Synergies Northern Ireland outlining its business model and contribution to the local economy.

Agreed: to invite International Synergies to brief the Committee.

Members considered correspondence from an individual on issues of staffing and workload of the Brexit division in DfE.

Agreed: to forward the correspondence to the Department for a response on the issues raised.

10. Any Other Business

The Committee discussed research that had been carried out looking at on the geographical spread across Northern Ireland of graduates working in the local labour markets and the geographical spread of those working in the local labour market with vocational skills, and those without basic skills.

Agreed: the Committee to review the research with a view to it informing the Committee's scrutiny of the Skills strategy and to receive a briefing from Department Officials on its current work to tackle skills and regional imbalance.

11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Committee will take place on Wednesday 18th March 2020 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings at 10am.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 13:15pm

Dr Caoímhe Archibald
Chairperson
Committee for the Economy

18th March 2020