



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

COMMITTEE FOR THE ECONOMY

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

17 JUNE 2020

ROOM 30, 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 John Stewart
Ms Claire Sugden

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

Apologies: Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Christopher Stalford

The meeting began at 10:07am in open session.

1. Apologies

As noted above.

2. Minutes

Agreed: the Minutes from 8th June 2020.

Agreed: the Minutes from 9th June 2020.

Agreed: the Minutes from 10th June 2020.

3. Chairpersons Business

The Chair informed Members of an invitation from the Chair of the House of Lords European Union Committee for the Chair and Deputy Chair to attend a virtual private meeting on the 30th June 2020, to discuss how Committees might work together in scrutinising the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland and any other issues arising from the UK withdrawing from the EU.

Agreed: That the Chair and Deputy Chair will attend and other Members who are available to also join the meeting.

4. Oral Briefing by Teleconference from the Minister – Overview

The Minister joined the meeting at 10.09am

Members received a briefing from:

Mrs Diane Dodds	Minister, Department for the Economy; and
Mr Diarmuid McLean	Department for the Economy

Key issues discussed included: appointments to the Economic Advisory Group and the remit of the group, reallocation of funds for emerging COVID-19 pressures, priorities in regards to the Protocol and UK trade negotiations with the EU, unfettered access to GB, airport connectivity, Northern Ireland readiness to take advantage of future agreed international trade agreements, forthcoming Executive paper on comprehensive plan for reopening of Northern Ireland post the COVID-19 situation.

The Minister left the meeting at 11.49am

Agreed: to receive an oral briefing on City Deals from the Department following recess.

Agreed: to forward correspondence received from the British Dental Association to the Department, asking for an urgent response on the severe difficulties for dental practices, as detailed in the letter, as a result of enforced lockdown of practices, and the current strategy of the Department to address these difficulties.

Agreed: to forward correspondence received from the Northern Ireland Turf Guardians Association in regards to the reopening of local bookmaker premises, for the Department to clarify urgently that bookmakers can open, under the same safety guidance that retail premises are to follow, as is appropriate to those premises.

Agreed: to forward correspondence from Social Enterprise NI providing an update on the impact on the sector due to the COVID-19 situation to the Department, to comment urgently on Social Enterprise NI's perceived lack of necessary financial support for the sector.

Agreed: the Committee considered the Departmental response to previous correspondence forwarded to the Department in regards to the impact on social enterprises from the COVID-19 situation and agreed to forward to Social Enterprise NI.

Agreed: the Committee agreed to write to the Minister and the First Minister and deputy First Minister to urge that any surpluses from the Executive's three business support funds should be allocated to a re-opened Hardship Fund which would be extended to those businesses and sectors that have not benefitted from any of the existing support schemes. Added to this would be any further surplus identified through the current Monitoring Round process.

5. Oral Briefing by Teleconference from Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment (NIUSE)

The representatives joined the meeting at 11.49am

Members received a briefing from:

Mr Norman Sterritt	Chair, Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment;
Mr David Babington	Chief Executive, Action Mental Health;
Ms Margaret Kelly	Director, Mencap; and
Mr Stephen Mathews OBE	Chief Executive, The Cedar Foundation.

Key issues discussed included: an overview on the impact of social distancing and the labour market disruption upon individuals with disabilities, the disproportionate effect upon employees with disabilities throughout the COVID-19 situation as individuals already facing significant barriers for employment in Northern Ireland in comparison to the rest of the UK, the proven success of the ESF, the Shared Prosperity Fund, and the need for disabled people to be consulted widely to ensure 'lived experience' input into policy making.

The representatives left the meeting at 12.26pm

Agreed: to write to the Minister to urge that urgent action be taken by the Department that will provide assurance and clarity to the sector that no gaps in funding will occur following the end of the European Social Fund in 2022 and the arrival of its replacement, the Shared Prosperity Fund.

6. Matters Arising

Noted: Members noted a Ministerial response providing an update on the Tourism Recovery Steering group and the Tourism Recovery Working Group.

Agreed: Members considered correspondence from the Permanent Secretary on the Non-Domestic RHI scheme, detailing an error originating at the scheme administrator Ofgem which has resulted in incorrect tariffs having been applied to a number of the RHI technologies since April 2019 to 18 May 2020 and 325 installations having received an overpayment with a total financial impact of £25,000. The Permanent Secretary outlined that there will, as a result, be a further strengthening of controls. The Committee agreed the Permanent Secretary's letter is highly concerning in its highlighting of further examples of errors within RHI Schemes.

Noted: Members considered correspondence from the House of Commons Treasury Committee regarding the Committee's request for information on Brexit Business Grant Funding and noted the Committee Office has forwarded the Committee's request on to HMRC, as advised by the Treasury Committee.

Noted: Members noted a response from the Minister for Small Business, Consumers & Labour Markets to the House of Lords EU Internal Market Sub-Committee's inquiry into UK-EU negotiations on the level playing field and state aid.

Agreed: Members considered correspondence from the Chair of the new House of Lords International Agreements Sub-Committee regarding its inquiry into the UK-US trade negotiations and agreed to forward information on the Call for Evidence to other statutory Committees affected and to highlight on social media to the Committee's stakeholder to encourage submissions to the Committee.

Noted: Members noted correspondence from the EU Affairs Manager providing a copy of a response from HM Treasury on the Ireland/Ni Protocol and VAT provisions.

Agreed: Members considered correspondence from NUS-USI calling for Executive measures to support young people to stay on in education during the current labour market disruption and agreed to forward to the Department for information.

Agreed: Members considered correspondence from NUS-USI outlining support which students in Scotland will receive from their devolved government and agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department for information.

Noted: Members considered Ministerial correspondence providing clarification on the Guarantees of Origin of Electricity Produced from High Efficiency Cogeneration (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018.

Agreed: Members considered the public consultation document on Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay and agreed to receive a summary of responses from the

Department following closure of the consultation on 10th August 2020, as well as an oral briefing from the Department.

Agreed: Members considered a Departmental response to the Committee's request for comment to correspondence from an individual in relation to the Presbyterian Mutual Society and agreed to forward the response onto the individual concerned.

Noted: Members noted a Departmental response explaining mutual recognition of professional qualifications is not dealt with in the Protocol and that future arrangements on this will form part of the subject of negotiations between the UK and the EU on the future relationship.

7. SR 2020/98 The Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Members considered SR 2020/98 The Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020.

Question put and agreed:

“That the Committee for the Economy has considered SR 2020/98 The Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 and, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules’ report, has no objection to the Rule.”

8. Correspondence

Noted: Members noted correspondence from the Committee for Infrastructure providing a copy of correspondence to the Economy Minister seeking an update on the funding package for ferry operators.

Agreed: Members considered correspondence from the Committee for Finance providing a copy of a response from the Finance Minister regarding financial assistance for road haulage, the Taxi Industry and the Transport Sector and agreed to respond to that Committee outlining that the Committee for Infrastructure has written to the Economy Minister on the matter of financial assistance to road haulage, and this Committee will await that response.

Agreed: Members noted correspondence from Jim Allister MLA to the Minister for the Economy regarding the concerns of a constituent around the RHI scheme and agreed to write to the Department requesting that the Committee receive a copy of the Department's response to Mr Allister.

Agreed: Members considered a brochure from Yellow Design in relation to its Smart City Tourism platform and agreed to write to the Department in support of the innovative project by the company in an important growth industry for the Northern Ireland economy and to arrange for an oral briefing from the company following recess.

Agreed: Members considered correspondence from a member of the public concerning the price of liquefied petroleum gas in North Ireland compared to England and agreed to write to the Department to ask for its views on the issues raised.

Agreed: Members considered correspondence from a local business owner in relation to the grant scheme and a perceived lack of support for local multiple store groups and agreed to write to the Department for an urgent response on the issue, highlighting the Committee wrote previously on the issue following its meeting of 3rd June 2020.

Noted: Members noted the European Commission Circular Economy Action Plan.

Agreed: Members considered correspondence from the Committee for Communities regarding social distancing issues for those with visual impairment and agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department to ask that it give consideration to the issue.

9. Forward Work Programme

Agreed: Members agreed the draft Forward Work Programme.

10. Any Other Business

Agreed: Members agreed to write to the Department to ask for the agreed Terms of Reference for the Economic Advisory Group.

11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Committee will take place on Monday 22nd June 2020 in Room 30, Parliament Buildings at 10am.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 1.05pm

Dr Caoímhe Archibald
Chairperson
Committee for the Economy
24th June 2020