



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 11th June 2025

Meeting Location: Queen's University, Belfast

Present:

Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Ms Emma Sheerin MLA

Apologies:

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

In Attendance:

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Katie McMaster (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Stuart Gilmour (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in public session at 10:07am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

Jonathan Buckley declared an interest in that he is currently repaying a student loan.

Diana Armstrong declared an interest in respect of her children's repayment of student loans.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Tourism NI

The Chairperson referred Members to press reports in respect of the appointment of a new Chief Executive for Tourism NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the outgoing Chief Executive to thank him for his service and to wish him well.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the new Chief Executive to congratulate her and welcome her to her new role.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 4 June 2025.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Queen's University Belfast –Higher Education funding challenges - evidence session

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 10:08am:

- Professor Sir Ian Greer, President and Vice-Chancellor, QUB;
- Professor Margaret Topping, Pro Vice-Chancellor for Global Engagement, QUB;
- Dr Ryan Feeney, Vice-President (Governance and External Affairs) and Registrar; and
- Kieran Minto, president, Queen's Student Union, QUB

Key issues discussed included: the economic impact of QUB in Northern Ireland; inequality of access to Higher Education: widening participation and the Pathway Programme; the need for enhanced student support services; childcare provision for students; the Belfast City and Growth Deal and the associated capital risk for QUB; alternative sources of income including Transnational Education (TNE), such as the overseas campus in GIFT City, India; the Maximum Aggregate Student Number (MaSN) cap; increases in Rol student applications and the associated funding for Rol students; tuition fee reform options; the need for budget clarity; university co-operation with business - triple helix working (government, academia and industry); and the negative impact of visa and immigration changes for international students and the prospective visa levy.

Emma Sheerin joined the meeting at 10:58am.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 11:19am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Queen's University Belfast seeking statistics on the number of applicants and the number of students currently enrolled from the Republic of Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department:

- urging clarity on the Higher Education budget for the incoming financial year;
- supporting the establishment of an independent panel to undertake the review of Higher Education funding;

- seeking an urgent update on the Terms of Reference and timeline for the Higher Education funding review;
- indicating its concerns in respect of the proposed 6% visa levy on international students; and
- seeking commentary on the proposal regarding the government of the RoI funding RoI students in Northern Ireland and the associated changes to MaSN.

7. Energy Efficiency Capital Grant (EECG) Scheme - evidence session

The following officials joined the meeting at 11:21am:

- Ryan White, Director of Heat, Buildings and Climate Change, Energy Group, DfE;
- Katrina Duddy, Head of Energy Management, Energy Group, DfE;
- Daniel Purdy, Energy & Resource Efficiency Manager, Invest NI; and
- Dr. Vicky Kell, Director of Innovation, Research & Development, Invest NI.

Key issues discussed included: EECG statistics - 90% of applications were for solar PV, demand was around five times higher than expectations, £5.5m of offers have been made with a further £8.5m in prospective offers; 75% of awards were for firms based outside of the Belfast area, the offer breakdown by business size was: 56% microbusinesses, 36% medium businesses and 8% large businesses; the average grant was £46k and the average project was £120k, 70% of initial enquiries and 37% of offers were from non-Invest NI companies, offers are expected to generate savings of 14million kWhrs representing a 30% saving on costs and a 40% saving on carbon and energy.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their briefing.

The officials left the meeting at 11:52am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Department seeking:

- clarity on the economic impact of the EECG;
- information on the average project costs for offers made to micro, medium and large businesses;

- confirmation of the timeline for the review and the unpausing of the scheme; and
- an update when the review is complete and when the scheme is to be unpaused.

Diana Armstrong left the meeting at 11:52am.

8. Industrial Training Levy SL1

David Honeyford declared an interest in that he is a director of a company within the construction industry.

The Committee considered the proposed statutory rule: The Industrial Training Levy (Construction Industry) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department to make the rule.

Diana Armstrong returned to the meeting at 11:54am.

9. Correspondence

9.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

9.2 2025-26 Departmental Business Plan

The Committee considered the Department's 2025-26 Business Plan and its 2024-25 Business Plan report including references to a number of action plans and strategies etc. that are to published in Q1 2025-26.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a briefing on the 2025-26 Departmental Business Plan.

9.3 Enhanced Investment Zones

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response confirming that 4 English Enhanced Investment Zones are expected to make use of tax exemptions.

9.4 Department's Disclaimed Accounts

Noted: The Committee noted a further Departmental response in respect of the Department's disclaimed accounts.

9.5 Support for CoDA

The Committee considered a response from the Department including the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) report on support for the City of Derry Airport (CoDA).

Sinead McLaughlin noted that the CMA report was positive.

Phillip Brett noted that the CMA report indicated that Derry City and Strabane District Council could have provided further information on the impact of the support on investment decisions in other airports.

9.6 EU Vehicle Emissions

The Committee considered a response from the Committee for Infrastructure (Cfi) accepting an invitation to undertake a joint concurrent evidence session on EU vehicle emissions regulations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Cfi and explain that owing to scheduling clashes, this evidence won't be taken as part of a joint concurrent meeting and will instead be heard on 2 July 2025.

9.7 Call for Evidence

The Committee considered a Call for Evidence from the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, in respect of committee engagement on taking evidence on cross-cutting matters.

Agreed: The Committee agreed for the Clerk to draft a response and for this to be considered at a subsequent Committee meeting.

9.8 NIFC NI Water Report

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council launch of its Sustainability Report on NI Water on 10 June 2025.

9.9 Unite Campaign

The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Finance in respect of the Unite the Union campaign relating to late night transport for workers in the hospitality sector.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking its views on the Unite the Union campaign.

9.10 Committee for Education motion

The Committee considered a motion previously agreed by the Committee for Education.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to support the following motion:

"That this Assembly takes note of the recent meeting of the Committee for Education and the Committee for the Economy in concurrent format; calls on the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy to act with urgency to deliver on the issues discussed including: the publication and implementation of a careers action plan; the publication and implementation of a wider action plan for the 14-19 strategy; a timeline for delivery of the careers portal; the publication

and implementation of a plan to improve post-school and post-19 SEND provision which includes legislative proposals that have been developed on a cross-departmental basis alongside colleagues in the Department of Health; and further calls on the Departments to develop policy proposals which clarify and support a collaborative relationship between post-16 education in schools and further education, as highlighted by the Independent Review of Education's recommendations to address the need for parity of esteem between academic and Further Education institutions and pathways"

9.11 ESR Report

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Examiner of Statutory Rules report including reference to SR 2025/90 The Freight Containers (Safety Convention) Regulations.

9.12 Geographical Indicators

Noted: The Committee noted House of Lords NI Scrutiny correspondence in respect of EU regulations relating to geographical indicators for craft and industrial products.

9.13 Critical Raw Materials

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee in respect of EU regulations in respect of critical raw materials.

9.14 Clean Energy Infrastructure

The Committee considered a request from SSE PLC to informally brief the Chairperson on investment in clean energy infrastructure

Agreed: The Committee agreed for the Chairperson to undertake an informal meeting, diary permitting.

9.15 RIA Teritary NW Education

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Royal Irish Academy 2024 policy report on tertiary education in the North West, pending the evidence session on 25 June 2025.

9.16 Concerned Individual

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from a concerned individual, to the Minister, in respect of an employment issue.

9.17 The Riverside Theatre in Coleraine

Noted: The Committee noted copies of multiple correspondences in respect of the closure of the Riverside Theatre in Coleraine.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme including the proposed dates for the Committee Stage of the Insolvency (Amendment) Bill and evidence sessions from QUB Unions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed its forward work programme, as amended.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and the Student Loan Company seeking clarity as to the differing student loan packages available for NI students studying in GB compared to GB students studying in NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on its sectoral action plans.

11. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

12. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 18 June 2025 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 12:05pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

11 June 2025