



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 6 March 2024**

**Meeting Location:** Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

**Present:**

Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Ms SORCHA Eastwood MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Mr Mike Nesbitt MLA

**Present via video-conference:**

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

**Apologies:**

None.

**In Attendance:**

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

James Gilsenan (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)



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Craig Mealey (Clerical Supervisor)

Michael Doran (Clerical Officer)

Eileen Regan (Senior Research Officer) – items 8 and 9 only

Chris Rothwell (Research officer) – items 8 and 9 only

The meeting commenced at 10:05am in closed session.

### **1. Procedural Advice**

The Committee noted procedural advice provided by the Clerk.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed its response to a correspondent in respect of a complaint.

Proceedings continued in public session from 10:10am.

### **2. Apologies**

There were no apologies.

### **3. Declarations of Interests**

There were no declarations of interest.



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#### **4. Chairperson's Business**

The Chairperson advised Members that in Written Answers, the Minister had advised of: an audit of childcare training pathways in Higher Education and Further Education; an audit of energy skills in support of the delivery of the Energy Strategy; and an evaluation of Skill Up.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking the Terms of Reference; the timeline for publication and sight of the associated reports, as soon as they are available.

The Chairperson thanked Members for their constructive contributions to the Assembly debate on Expanding Support for Apprenticeships on 5 March 2024.

#### **5. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting of 28 February 2024.

#### **6. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

#### **7. Departmental Oral Briefing – Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill**

The Committee noted briefing papers from the Department.



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The officials joined the meeting at 10.12am

The Committee received a briefing from:

**Sarah Brady**                      Director of Energy Operations – Department for the  
Economy

**Linzi Hyvart**                      Energy Legislation – Department for the Economy

Key issues discussed included: the need for legislation to update the Regulator's role to reflect requirements of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022; the timing of the consultation on the proposed legislation; the policy ambition of renewable, locally produced energy to meet environmental targets and protect consumers from price volatility; Northern Ireland's ongoing reliance on home heating oil; possible additional consumer energy costs for paper bills; the methodology behind poverty and fuel poverty figures.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their briefing.

The officials left the meeting at 10.47am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to invite the Utility Regulator to provide an oral and written briefing on its role and future responsibilities.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to write to the Utility Regulator for further information regarding: the potential for the regulation of home heating oil; whether there is evidence of electricity or gas consumers being charged more for paper billing; and the likely costs associated with the proposed



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changes and the associated scope for covering those costs through increased levies on energy licence holders.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to suggest that the vires of the proposed legislation, which would permit the Utility Regulator to provide advice and guidance etc. on a range of renewable and other measures, should be extended beyond the Department for the Economy to encompass all Northern Ireland departments so as to promote cross-departmental planning as part of the delivery of the Energy Strategy.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to write to the Department seeking further information as to the calculation of fuel poverty levels and poverty levels in Northern Ireland. Members sought an explanation as to the apparent disparity between reports indicating that poverty in Northern Ireland is lower than equivalent areas of GB but fuel poverty is higher.

### **8. Assembly Research Introductory Oral Briefing**

The Committee received an introductory briefing from Eileen Regan, Senior Research Officer on the services available to committees and Members from the Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe).

### **9. Assembly Research Oral Briefing – Economic Context**

The Committee received a briefing from Chris Rothwell, Research Officer, RaISe on the economic context for Northern Ireland.



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*Mr Delargy left the meeting at 11:24 am*

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek additional RaISe written briefings on:

- the performance of the Northern Ireland economy as compared to other comparable jurisdictions including but not limited to other UK jurisdictions.
- the decline in self-employment since the pandemic and the new employment categories of those who were formerly self-employed.
- inactivity levels in Northern Ireland including the barriers to employment and the impact of childcare policies on those barriers in other jurisdictions.
- the nature and impact of carer supports in Republic of Ireland and the European Union on tackling barriers to employment in those jurisdictions and their applicability to Northern Ireland.
- sub-regional wage differential and productivity and employment differences across the Super Output Areas and sub-regions in Northern Ireland.
- the sectors likely to be adversely and positively affected by Artificial Intelligence (AI) including the probable impact of AI on the public sector in Northern Ireland.
- the breakdown of imports and exports between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, the Republic of Ireland; the European Union and the rest of the world

The Chairperson thanked the RaISe officials for their briefings and the essential work that RaISe undertakes on behalf of Members.

*Mr Delargy rejoined the meeting at 11:40 am*



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## **10. Correspondence**

### **10.1 Index**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

### **10.2 Employment Rights**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Departmental correspondence indicating that the Committee would be kept abreast of legislation affecting employment rights.

### **10.3 Miscarriage Leave / Pay Consultation**

**Agreed:** The Committee noted a Departmental update on the consultation on miscarriage leave and pay. The Committee agreed that it was content to forego sight of the incomplete Departmental analysis of responses on the strict understanding that the Department shares the analysis when complete and advises the Committee on the way forward for this important legislation.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting the full analysis of responses once complete.

### **10.4 Carer's Leave**

**Agreed:** The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of planned legislation on employment rights including carers' leave and agreed to forward the correspondence to Carers NI and to seek an oral briefing from that organisation.



### **10.5 Tuition Fee Consultation**

**Noted:** The Committee noted that the Minister had not initiated the related consultation and that at his direction there was to be no substantial increase in tuition fees.

**Agreed:** The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of a draft consultation on tuition fee increases. The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking: details of the timeline and terms of reference for the review of HE funding; an explanation of the application of the MaSN formula for HE and FE; information on the level of widening participation funding generated by non-UK students; and an explanation of the one-off and recurrent costs associated with the removal of the MaSN cap on student numbers and the extent to which these costs in these circumstances would exceed the £1m (teaching grant cost) per 180 additional undergraduate students, as indicated in the consultation document.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity as to whether the Department of Health provides tuition fee cover for all allied health professional HE courses.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to write to the Department seeking: further details on the fee levels and enrolments associated with post graduate courses and the Department's plans to address the disparity between the fees and the student supports which are currently available.





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### **10.6 Industrial De-Rating**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a response from the Committee for Finance in respect of industrial de-rating.

### **10.7 Written Ministerial Statement**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a written ministerial statement from the Minister of Finance indicating that industrial de-rating protections would remain in place.

### **10.8 Financial Out-turn**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response on the financial out-turn for 2022-23 and projected out-turn for 2023-24.

### **10.9 Capital Report**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the Investment Strategy report for the Department for February 2024.

### **10.10 ETA – Ministerial Response**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Ministerial correspondence in respect of the Electronic Travel Authorisation scheme.

### **10.11 Arm's Length Body Review**

**Agreed:** The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of the review of the Labour Relations Agency and advising in respect of the reviews of the 6 FE colleges; the Health and Safety Executive NI; and



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Stranmillis University College. The Committee agreed to write to the Department and seek sight of the relevant review reports.

### **10.12 Late Payment Framework**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of the late payment framework.

### **10.13 2<sup>nd</sup> ESR Report**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the 2<sup>nd</sup> report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

### **10.14 NUS-USI**

**Agreed:** The Committee considered a request from the National Union of Students – Union of Students in Ireland seeking a meeting with the Chairperson and agreed that it was content for him to take the meeting, subject to his availability.

### **10.15 Association of British Insurers**

**Agreed:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Association of British Insurers (ABI) on measures to tackle increasing car insurance and agreed to write to ABI seeking a briefing on the impact on increasing motor insurance costs on the economy of Northern Ireland.

### **10.16 Belfast Maritime Trust**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Belfast Maritime Trust to the Minister in respect of the Belfast Waterfront Promenade Framework.



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## **11. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered a draft of its Forward Work Programme.

**Noted:** The Committee noted the Ministerial briefing on budget matters scheduled for 20 March 2024. The Committee indicated that it hoped that the Minister would also make reference to his legislative and other policy plans for the mandate at that briefing.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed its Forward Work Programme, as drafted.

## **12. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

## **13. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting**

The next meeting of the Committee for the Economy will be at 10am on Wednesday 13 March 2024 in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 11.55am.

**Phillip Brett MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**13 March 2024**