



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 17 April 2024**

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

**Present:**

- Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)
- Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
- Ms Sorchá Eastwood MLA
- Mr David Honeyford MLA
- Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA
- Mr Mike Nesbitt MLA
- Mr Philip McGuigan MLA
- Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

**Apologies:** None

**In Attendance:**

- Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
- Anthea Matthews (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
- Craig Mealey (Clerical Supervisor)
- Michael Doran (Clerical Officer)



## Northern Ireland Assembly

The meeting commenced in closed session at 9.33am.

### **1. Closed Session - Departmental oral briefing on the Non-Domestic RHI Scheme**

The Committee noted tabled correspondence from the Department.

Officials joined the meeting at 9:33am

The Committee received an oral briefing from:

Mr Ian Snowden, Permanent Secretary, Department for the Economy

Mr Richard Rodgers, Head of Energy Group, Department for the Economy

Ms Sarah Brady, Director of Energy Operations, Department for the Economy

The Chairperson recorded his disappointment in respect of the quality of Departmental responses and assured officials that the Committee would use all powers at its disposal in order to support scrutiny and protect the public interest.

Key issues discussed included: Ofgem and the administration of the RHI scheme; the requirement for primary legislation; the need for the approval of business cases, non-domestic RHI tariffs, related costs and timescales and ongoing legal proceedings.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their briefing.

Officials left the meeting at 10:37am

**Agreed:** The Committee felt that owing to - what was understood to be - ongoing legal proceedings it could not readily undertake further public scrutiny of these matters even though Members expressed a strong and unambiguous desire to do so. The Committee noted that the proper and considered scrutiny of related legislation would likely provide an excellent opportunity to hear from all relevant stakeholders publicly. The Committee therefore agreed to defer public consideration of evidence from stakeholders on the non-domestic RHI scheme until the legislative scrutiny process began.



## Northern Ireland Assembly

- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance seeking clarity on costs and in respect of the timescales for the approval of the business case for a revised RHI tariff.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the Chairperson would write to the Chairperson of Ofgem seeking clarity as to the reasoning underpinning Ofgem's course of action and the related timescales.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy: urging it to commission the drafting of all of the relevant legislation and to ensure its timely introduction; seeking a breakdown of the associated contingency administration costs for the scheme; and seeking also information on the legal fees associated with the Department's consideration of these matters.

Proceedings were suspended at 10:48am

Proceedings resumed in public session at 10:57am

### **2. Apologies**

There were no apologies.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

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

The Chairperson recorded his thanks to Members for their attendance at the informal meeting with US Special Envoy Joe Kennedy III on Tuesday 16 April 2024.



## Northern Ireland Assembly

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the US Special Envoy, thanking him for taking the time to meet with the Committee and offering to engage further with him on relevant matters in future.

### **5. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting of 10 April 2024.

### **6. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

### **7. Oral Evidence Session – Further Education College Performance, Review and Capital Projects**

The Committee noted briefing papers from the Department.

Officials joined the meeting at 10:58am.

The Committee received an oral briefing from:

Ms Louise Watson, Director of Further Education, Department for the Economy

Grainne Samm, Deputy Director of Further Education, Department for the Economy

Mr Neil Madeley, Head of Further Education Capital Projects Team, Department for the Economy

Key issues discussed included: the value of FE; the need for resources to support the effective delivery of FE; the development of the new FE delivery model; the development of the 14-19 Education and Training Framework; the strengthening of



## Northern Ireland Assembly

provision in respect of careers guidance; and the consultation on the Castlereagh campus.

Mr Nesbitt made a declaration of interest as his wife is a lecturer at Belfast Metropolitan College.

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 11:28am

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their briefing.

Officials left the meeting at 11:51am

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the timeline for the delivery of the next phases and the conclusion of the overall project to develop a new model of FE delivery. The Committee also agreed to seek clarity as to the aspects of FE provision that the model will seek to nurture and maintain.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy and the Department of Education seeking further information on the development of the 14-19 Education and Training Framework including the timelines for the next phases, in particular the appointment of an Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) etc..

### **8. Oral Briefing – Further Education Colleges, Management Representative Organisation**

The Committee noted: briefing papers from FE management and a copy of the written Ministerial statement on the FE pay negotiations

Witnesses joined the meeting at 11:55am

The Committee received an oral briefing from:

Mr Leo Murphy, Principal and Chief Executive, North West Regional College



## Northern Ireland Assembly

Ms Louise Warde-Hunter, Principal and Chief Executive, Belfast Metropolitan College

Ms Celine McCartan, Principal and Chief Executive, South West College

Key issues discussed included: the importance of communicating the benefits of FE; different learning options; the new model for FE delivery; pay negotiations; 14-19 Framework; the Castlereagh campus cross-border relationships

Mike Nesbitt left the meeting at 12:28pm

Jonathan Buckley rejoined the meeting at 12:59pm

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their briefing.

Witnesses left the meeting at 1:04pm

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy in respect of the new model of FE delivery suggesting that it give particular consideration to unintended consequences associated with the differing funding models in schools and FE colleges.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy and the Department of Education in respect of the 14-19 Education and Training Framework seeking clarity and timescales for: the review of general qualifications; the review of vocational qualifications; the evaluation of occupational studies; and the evaluation of the Entitlement Framework.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Atlantic Technological University (ATU) and Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) seeking a written briefing on how they work with NI partner organisations to promote cross-border FE/HE opportunities.



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## **9. Assembly Research - Written Briefings**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Assembly Research papers on:

- the performance of the Northern Ireland economy; a comparison with other jurisdictions;
- Northern Ireland external trade in goods and services 2013-22; and
- support for unpaid carers.

## **10. Correspondence**

### **10.1 Index**

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

### **10.2 Partnership Agreement between the Department and Invest NI**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of the Partnership Agreement between the Department and Invest NI

### **10.3 Renewable Energy Incentive Scheme**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a response to Committee queries regarding a renewable energy incentive scheme – the scheme will likely support 5MW and above but further consideration is to be given to 0.5MW to 5MW and smaller microgeneration schemes.



## Northern Ireland Assembly

Philip McGuigan left the meeting at 1:09pm

### **10.4 Debt Relief Orders criteria**

The Committee considered correspondence from the Minister indicating that Debt Relief Order criteria will likely be altered in line with changes in England and Wales including the abolition of the £90 fee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to postpone the related Departmental briefing on Debt Relief Orders until the relevant legislation is available.

### **10.5 Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill**

The Committee considered correspondence on the Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) in respect of the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill for which the Scottish Parliament has declined legislative consent.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update of its consideration of this LCM.

### **10.6 Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill**

The Committee considered correspondence on the LCM in respect of the Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill for which the Welsh Senedd has declined legislative consent.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update of its consideration of this LCM





Northern Ireland  
Assembly

### **10.7 Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from Treasury to a House of Lords Committee on the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism.

### **10.8 7th and 8th report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the 7th and 8th report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

### **10.9 British Heart Foundation Report**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a British Heart Foundation Report on the contribution of medical research funding by charities to the Northern Ireland economy.

### **10.10 Renewable Energy Systems Limited**

The Committee considered a letter from Renewable Energy Systems Limited requesting a meeting with the Chairperson to discuss how to unlock economic and renewable energy opportunities for consumers, businesses and communities across Northern Ireland.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that owing to the pressures of its forward work programme, it would decline the invitation.

### **10.11 National Union of Students – Union of Students in Ireland.**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of the manifesto document from the National Union of Students – Union of Students in Ireland.



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## **11. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered a draft of its Forward Work Programme.

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

## **12. Any Other Business**

The Committee considered matters relating to the impact of the cost of living crisis on the hospitality industry.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to invite Hospitality Ulster to brief on the economic consequences for the industry of the cost of living crisis.

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 10.00am on Wednesday 24 April 2024 in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:14pm.

**Phillip Brett MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**24 April 2024**