



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 21 February 2024**

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

**In Attendance:** Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)  
Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA  
Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA  
Ms Sorchá Eastwood MLA  
Mr David Honeyford MLA  
Mr Philip McGuigan MLA  
Ms Sinead McLaughlin MLA  
Mr Mike Nesbitt MLA

**Apologies:** None.

**In Attendance:** Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Bronagh Irwin (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Craig Mealey (Clerical Supervisor)



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Michael Doran (Clerical Officer)

Shauna Mageean (EU Affairs Manager) – item 7 only

Jessica Jacques (EU Affairs Officer) – item 7 only

The meeting commenced at 10:02am in closed session.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted that the oral briefing from the Examiner of Statutory Rules had been cancelled and agreed that a written briefing was sufficient.

The Committee agreed to move to open session at 10.02am.

### **1. Examiner of Statutory Rules**

This item was cancelled as noted above.

### **2. Apologies**

There were no apologies.

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

There were no declarations of interests.



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

Members noted that the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson met with informally with the Minister for the Economy on Monday 19 February 2024 immediately prior to his Ministerial Statement on Economic Vision.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the Chairperson should write to the Minister for the Economy requesting that he provide an oral and written briefing, at his earliest convenience, setting out the Department's spending pressures and the proposed budget for 2024-25.

### **5. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting of 14 February 2024.

### **6. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

### **7. EU Affairs – Oral Briefing**

The Committee noted supporting documentation.

Assembly officials joined the meeting at 10.05am.

Members received a briefing from:

**Shauna Mageean**

EU Affairs Manager – Northern Ireland Assembly



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**Jessica Jacques**

EU Affairs Officer – Northern Ireland Assembly

Key issues discussed included: the UK Internal Market Scheme, Free Trade Agreements, Common Frameworks; the establishment of an office in Belfast of the Department for International Trade; mobility of students and workers; issues related to divergence; tourism; and InterTrade UK.

### **8. Departmental First Day Oral Briefing – Part 2**

The Committee noted a First Day Brief from the Department.

The officials joined the meeting at 10.48am.

Members received a briefing from:

**Moira Doherty**

Head of Skills and Education Group – Department of the Economy

**Shane Murphy**

Head of International and Economic Relations Group -  
Department of the Economy

Mike Nesbitt MLA declared an interest as his wife is an employee of a Further Education college.

Key issues discussed included: A voluntary severance scheme available to staff at Further Education (FE) colleges; employment and skills programmes; apprenticeships; Higher Education expansion in the North West; student mobility; Internal Market Scheme and Trusted Trader Scheme; Circular Economy Strategy for Northern Ireland; and trade and investment policy.



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The officials left the meeting at 12.04pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek clarity on the delivery model and the different funding packages which will support the expansion of Higher Education in the North West specifically: how much money there is to increase the number of student places in the North West; over what timescale this money will be spent; and who will contribute and allocate this support.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek its assessment of the impact of the increase in the turnover threshold (increasing from £500k to £2m) on the number of firms making use or likely to make use of the UK Internal Market Scheme (UKIMS).

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for a breakdown of the number of businesses availing of the Customs Duty Waiver Scheme, including whether there has been an increased uptake since the expansion of the scheme in January 2024; and for its assessment of the extent to which the allowances provided for by the scheme may go unclaimed.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request, when available, an update on the details of the new scheme for business-to-consumer parcels, moved by authorised carriers which is to be in place later in 2024.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek its opinion on the Azores judgement and its implication for the devolution of corporation



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tax to Northern Ireland including whether a different level of corporation tax may be viewed as being in breach of EU state aid rules.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek an update on the tender process previously commissioned by Invest NI to procure a framework of contractors to provide specialist dual market access support.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department of the Economy to request an update on the outworking of the Independent Review of Careers Guidance, including details of policy and delivery responsibilities associated with the Department of the Economy and the Department for Education.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to advise the Committee for Education of its interest in undertaking joint work on the important cross-cutting policy area of careers guidance.

*Mr Delargy left the meeting at 12.08pm.*

### 9. General Correspondence

**Agreed:** Members noted an invitation from the National Trust and agreed to decline due to the pressure of other business in the Committee's Forward Work Programme.

*Mr Honeyford and Mr Nesbitt left the meeting at 12.08pm.*

**Agreed:** The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual seeking clarity on the Minister for the Economy's plans in respect of FE lecturers' pay and the collective bargaining model; and agreed to write to



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the individual to advise that these important issues were considered by the Committee and that regrettably further clarity could not be provided until a settlement is reached.

**Agreed:** The Committee considered a request from an individual seeking Assembly memorabilia and agreed to respond providing a copy of the agenda of the first meeting, signed by the Chairperson.

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of a press release from the Fiscal Council.

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence to the Minister for the Economy from the Keeping Recycling Local campaign.

**Agreed:** Members considered a document from the NI Chamber of Commerce and Industry on suggested reforms to the Apprenticeship Levy including the adoption of a £100m ring-fenced Skills Fund. The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for the Economy to stress the Committee's concerns in respect of the reported considerable adverse difference between contributions made by Northern Ireland employers and benefits received in respect of apprenticeships. The Committee further agreed to urge the Minister to press his Executive colleagues to consider the case for reform of the Apprenticeship Levy and lobby HM Treasury accordingly.

**Noted:** The Committee noted a response from the senior adviser to the U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland for Economic Affairs.

**Agreed:** The Committee considered a request from Ofcom to meet with the Chairperson and brief him informally on telecoms issues; and agreed it was content for the Chairperson to attend the briefing, subject to his availability.



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**Agreed:** The Committee further agreed to write to Ofcom in Northern Ireland and request updates, as appropriate, on relevant telecom and economic accessibility issues including in respect of the Barrier Busting Taskforce.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted correspondence from an individual on university appointments, in particular PhD studentships and agreed to respond indicating that as Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University are listed as public authorities, it is a matter for those bodies and the Equality Commission to ensure compliance with Section 75 requirements and that this should be set out in the relevant equality schemes for the universities.

### 10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a draft of its Forward Work Programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing from the Minister on his 2024-25 budget plans.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to invite the Northern and Western Regional Assembly and the North West Strategic Growth Partnership to provide a briefing to the Committee on regional balance issues. The Committee further agreed that the briefing would be received at a Committee meeting held in the Foyle region.

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





## **11. Any Other Business**

**Agreed:** The Committee noted with concern the potential job losses at BT in County Fermanagh and agreed to write to the Department expressing its concerns and requesting that it do all that it can in order to support the affected employees and minimise the adverse economic impact.

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

The next meeting of the Committee for the Economy will be at 10am on Wednesday 28 February 2024 in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 12.14pm.

**Phillip Brett MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**28 February 2024**