



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 13 March 2024**

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

**Present:**

- Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)
- Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Ms Sorchá Eastwood MLA
- Mr David Honeyford MLA
- Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

**Present via video-conference:**

- Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
- Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

**Apologies:**

- Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA
- Mr Mike Nesbitt MLA

**In Attendance:**

- Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
- James Gilsonan (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)
- Craig Mealey (Clerical Supervisor)
- Michael Doran (Clerical Officer)



The meeting commenced in public session at 10:03am.

### **1. Apologies**

Apologies were as indicated above

### **2. Declarations of Interests**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **3. Chairperson's Business**

The Chairperson advised Members that in Written Answers, the Minister had advised of the development of: a sub-regional economic action plan; and a new approach to quality assessment in Higher Education involving the Quality Assurance Agency.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking the relevant Terms of Reference; the timelines and sight of the associated reports in respect of the written answers above.

The Chairperson advised Members that he would speak on behalf of the Committee in the parental bereavement statutory rule debate on 19 March 2024.

The Chairperson also advised of an anticipated applicability motion.



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**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that, at this time, it was content for the Chairperson to not contribute to the relevant applicability motion debate, which was expected imminently, as the Committee had not received any recent relevant information and consequently had had very limited opportunity to consider the consequences of EU replacement Act 2023/2411.

### **4. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting of 6 March 2024.

### **5. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

### **6. Oral Evidence Session – RenewableNI**

The Committee noted briefing papers from RenewableNI.

The witnesses joined the meeting at 10.07am

The Committee received a briefing from:

Steven Agnew

Director, RenewableNI;

Paul Carson

Deputy Chairperson RenewableNI and Managing Director  
Strategic Power Group; and



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Garth McGimpsey

Chairperson RenewableNI and Senior Project Manager of  
Renewable Energy Systems Ltd.

Mr Philip McGuigan MLA declared an interest as a former district councillor who had campaigned in respect of planning applications relating to renewable energy.

Key issues discussed included: the time and cost discrepancies relating to planning applications between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; the length of time taken for statutory consultees to feed into planning applications due to resourcing issues; the need for joined-up development work for grid connection; the need for an updated mandate for the Utility Regulator; the role of community investment; the need for the development of battery storage to complement the increase in renewable energy generation; the importance of diversification in renewable energy generation sources in Northern Ireland; the Accelerating Renewables Task Force; and training and preparing a workforce for new technologies.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their briefing.

The witnesses left the meeting at 11.29am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek further information on the way forward for increasing renewable energy generation as part of its planned briefing from the Utility Regulator including the regulation of heat networks.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to seek a briefing from the System Operator for Northern Ireland on grid issues relating to renewable electricity generation.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs



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highlighting concerns in respect of considerably higher planning fees in Northern Ireland compared to other jurisdictions and seeking the reasoning underpinning the costs and clarity as to whether the DfI new low carbon planning statement will address the issue of planning costs and delays for renewable energy schemes.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the development of a new renewable energy incentive scheme and information on the progress of the external consultant it had contracted with in respect of related matters.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the final version of the Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan (OREAP) and a progress update on the OREAP Strategic Environmental Assessment.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek sight of the post project evaluation prepared by the Department on the NI Renewable Obligations scheme and the risk assessment and audit plan of “other aspects of renewable energy” commissioned by the then Minister in 2022.

### **7. Departmental Oral Briefing – Petroleum Licensing**

The Committee noted briefing papers from the Department.

The officials joined the meeting at 11.34am

The Committee received a briefing from:

Jimmy Graham      Energy Group, Department for the Economy

Lorraine Fleming      Energy Group, Department for the Economy



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Mark Wilson                      Energy Group, Department for the Economy

Key issues discussed included: the status of two current applications for petroleum exploration licences in Northern Ireland; the proposed timeline for legislation from the Department; the current consultation on the proposed legislation that is due to end in April 2024; and the administrative moratorium on the granting of licences pending the passage of the proposed legislation.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their briefing.

The officials left the meeting at 11.44 am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek a further briefing from the Department following the conclusion of the consultation and prior to any final decision-making by the Minister.

### **8. The Employment Rights (Increase of Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024.**

The Committee noted a proposed statutory rule The Employment Rights (Increase of Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024.

## **9. Correspondence**

### **9.1 Index**

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



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### **9.2 Legislative Consent Motion**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Welsh Parliament on a Legislative Consent Motion relating to public procurement matters in respect of the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill.

### **9.3 EU Eco-Design**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of correspondence to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero regarding eco-design and energy labelling for tumble-dryers and related government research into the potential for divergence.

### **9.4 Single Electricity Market**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of correspondence to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero regarding the Single Electricity Market.

### **9.5 Written Ministerial Statement**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of the written ministerial statement from the Finance Minister indicating the final financial plan for 2023-24 including further allocations to the Department for the Economy.

### **9.6 Partnership Agreement**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an updated copy of the partnership agreement between the Department and South West Regional College.



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### **9.7 Integrated Strategy for Business Events**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response on its Integrated Strategy for Business Events.

### **9.8 Tourism NI – Letter of Comfort**

The following Members declared an interest as members of the NILGOSC pension scheme: Mr Phillip Brett MLA; Mr Gary Middleton MLA; Ms Sorchá Eastwood MLA; Mr David Honeyford MLA; Mr Philip McGuigan MLA; and Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA.

**Noted:** The Committee noted further information in respect of the liability associated with the Tourism NI NILGOSC pensions.

### **9.9 Secondary Schools Union (SSUNI)**

**Agreed:** The Committee noted further information from SSUNI and agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to meet with SSUNI, subject to his availability.

### **9.10 ESR Report**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the 3rd report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

### **9.11 Competition and Markets Authority (CMA)**

**Agreed:** The Committee noted correspondence from CMA and agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to meet with the CMA, subject to his availability.





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**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the reform of the price marking order and the connections policy framework.

### **9.12 British Holiday and Home Parks Association**

**Agreed:** The Committee noted correspondence from the British Holiday and Home Parks Association Ltd and agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to meet with the Association, subject to his availability.

### **9.13 Wealth Tax**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual to the Finance Minister in respect of wealth taxes.

### **9.14 Renewable Energy**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual to the Economy Minister in respect of renewable energy.

## **10. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered a draft of its Forward Work Programme and a proposed planning session at SONI following summer recess; the re-timetabling of the disqualification and insolvency brief to 5 June 2024; a proposed joint meeting with the Committee for Education on 19 June 2024; options for its visit to the Foyle constituency later in June 2024; and proposed Research and Information Service (RaISe) briefings.



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

### **11. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

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

The next meeting of the Committee for the Economy will be at 10am on Wednesday 20 March 2024 in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:03pm.

**Phillip Brett MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**20 March 2024**