



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 22 May 2024

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

- 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 Sinéad McLaughlin MLA
- Mr Mike Nesbitt MLA

Apologies:

- Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

In Attendance:

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

Michael Doran (Clerical Officer)

Chris Rothwell (Research Officer) – agenda item 9 only

The meeting commenced in public session at 10:01am.

Proceedings were chaired by the Deputy Chairperson, Gary Middleton MLA.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's business.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting of 15 May 2024.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Childcare Issues - Oral and written evidence - Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA)

Witnesses joined the meeting at 10:03am.

Sorcha Eastwood joined the meeting at 10:06am

The Committee received oral and written evidence from:

Patricia Lewsley-Mooney CBE, CEO, NICMA; and

Andrea Knocker, Regional Development Manager, NICMA

Key issues discussed included: the reduction in registered childminders; registration issues; the increase in unregistered childminders; the benefits of an academy approach to the development of registered childminders; options for alternative childcare training pathways and the need for a stable childminding training and development budget; linkages with Labour Market Partnerships; the previous Rural Childcare Strategy; the need for wrap around care; and childcare provision for children below 3-4 years old.

Witnesses left the meeting at 11:14am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Health, the Department of Education, the Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy indicating its view that wrap around childcare was an essential component in a successful economic strategy and expressing concern in respect of: the marked reduction in registered childminders and consequent low uptake of children's tax credits; the apparent gap in provision in respect of children younger than age 3-4 years; bureaucracy in respect of the registration process; the low uptake by district councils of the NICMA academy training model for bringing on-stream registered childminders and Approved Home Childcarers; and the need for a stable childminding training and development budget.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department of Health, the Department of Education, the Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy asking how these departments will work together in order to: address bureaucracy and delays in respect of the childminding registration process; explore with district councils the use of the NICMA academy training model for bringing on-stream registered childminders and Approved Home Childcarers; explore the use of the Labour Market Partnerships so as to develop alternate

training pathways which exploit synergies between the FE colleges, NICMA and other training providers; and secure a stable training budget to provide continuous professional development for childminders.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department of Health urging it to bring forward the review of the ratio of carers to children in childcare settings in order to ensure child welfare and well-being as well as the sustainability of the sector.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department for the Economy and the Department of Education seeking further information on the Terms of Reference and timelines for the Childcare Task & Finish Group including the engagement by DfE with the Group and seeking sight of the relevant papers that have been submitted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to NICMA seeking further information on the NICMA academy training model for bringing on-stream registered childminders and Approved Home Childcarers and its innovative work with Labour Market Partnerships.

Agreed: Pending receipt of the above, the Committee agreed to give further consideration to writing to the district councils urging them to make the most appropriate use of the NICMA academy training model for bringing on-stream registered childminders and Approved Home Childcarers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission Assembly Research to produce a paper on the economic aspects of the previous Rural Childcare Strategy.

7. Budget 2024-25 - Oral and written evidence - Department for the Economy

Officials joined the meeting at 11:21am.

The Committee received oral and written evidence from:

Ms Johanna Park, Head of Financial Management, Department for the Economy

Ms Susan Butler, Head of Financial Planning, Department for the Economy

Ms Niamh McGarvey, Head of In-Year Budget Management, Department for the Economy

Key issues discussed included: additional funding from other sources; the allocation of support for a Skills Fund; the timing of further allocations to Higher Education; the use of AME to cover RHI costs; June monitoring allocations; and funding for a careers portal.

Officials left the meeting at 11:57am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information in respect of: the 2023-24 opening and closing positions for budget lines and ALBs; the sources and quanta of other supports; clarity on the use of AME budgets for renewables and RHI recommendation costs; information on the phasing of support for Magee expansion; and the economic impact of reduced funding for NI Screen.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Permanent Secretary seeking clarity in respect of the difference in allocations to ALBs from 2023-24 to 2024-25.

Proceedings were suspended at 12:04pm.

Sinead McLaughlin left the meeting at 12:04pm.

Proceedings resumed in closed session at 12:09pm

8. RalSe- Written Briefing on changes in employment post pandemic

The Committee noted a RalSe briefing paper on changes in employment categories post-pandemic.

9. RalSe - Oral and written briefing on Economic Fundamentals

The Committee received an oral and written briefing from the Assembly Research and Information Service on economic fundamentals.

Mike Nesbitt left the meeting at 12:23pm

Proceedings continued in public session from 12:33pm

10. Correspondence

10.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

10.2 Maze Long Kesh site

The Committee considered correspondence in respect of the reported shortage of developable land and plans for the development of the Maze Long Kesh site.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the MLK Development Corporation board inviting it to brief the Committee on its plans for the development of this important regional site.

10.3 Shared Prosperity Fund – Departmental Response

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence in respect of the Shared Prosperity Fund and support for Labour Market Partnerships.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to NICVA etc. for information

10.4 Shared Prosperity Fund – Ministerial Response

The Committee considered a response in respect of the Shared Prosperity Fund and support for Labour Market Partnerships from the Minister for Levelling Up.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to NICVA etc. for information.

10.5 NSMC

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence including an oral Ministerial statement on the NSMC meeting on 26 April 2024.

10.6 Fuel Poverty

Noted: The Committee noted a response to Committee queries in respect of the methodology for the calculation of fuel poverty.

10.7 Vires of the Utility Regulator

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Agriculture, Environment, Rural Affairs on varying the vires of the Utility Regulator to support net zero climate change targets.

10.8 Single Electricity Market

Noted: The Committee noted a response to Committee queries relating to EU regulations which will affect the Single Electricity Market.

10.9 Buy-out and Mutualisation

Noted: The Committee noted a response providing explanations of the buy-out and mutualisation practices in respect of renewable energy supply.

10.10 Presbyterian Mutual Society

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in respect of the final losses associated with the Presbyterian Mutual Society. As liquidation won't conclude until later this year, final numbers can't be provided. However it appears that there was a £50m loss plus a further £12.3m of credit loss set against interest received of £25.4m.

10.11 City and Growth Deals

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department of Finance setting out City and Growth Deal governance and job creation estimates.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance highlighting the importance of a phased approach to the allocation of City and Growth Deal funding so as to minimise the adverse impact of inflation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the relevant correspondence to the Committee for Infrastructure and the Committee for Communities for their information.

10.12 Minister's Ill Health

Noted: The Committee noted the response to the Committee's best wishes letter to the Minister.

10.13 14th ESR report

Noted: The Committee noted the 14th ESR report.

10.14 Arbitration Bill

The Committee considered information provided on the Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) on the Arbitration Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write and seek the views of the NI Chamber of Commerce, CBI NI and the Federation of Small Businesses NI on this Bill.

10.15 Data Protection and Digital Information Bill.

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence indicating that the Welsh Senedd has declined to provide consent for the LCM on the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill.

10.16 HoL Single Electricity Market

Noted: The Committee noted a correspondence to the HoL Committee on the Windsor Framework on the Single Electricity Market Structured Group.

10.17 EU Regulations Critical Raw Materials

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence to the Department for Business and Trade in respect of EU regulations relating to the supply of critical raw materials.

10.18 Digital Comparison Association.

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Digital Comparison Association on car insurance.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed a revised draft of its Forward Work Programme.

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 10.00am on Wednesday 29 May 2024 in the Plenary Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The joint concurrent meeting of the Committee for the Economy and the Committee for Education will be at 10.30am on Wednesday 29 May 2024 in the Plenary Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:43pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

29 May 2024