



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 1 May 2024

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

Mr Mike Nesbitt MLA

Apologies:

Ms Sorchá Eastwood MLA

Present via video-conferencing:

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

In Attendance:

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Anthea Matthews (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Craig Mealey (Clerical Supervisor)

Michael Doran (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in public session at 10.03am.

Agreed: The Committee noted tabled Departmental correspondence and agreed to defer the scheduled oral evidence session on the 2024-25 budget until 5 June 2024.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interests

David Honeyford declared an interest in respect of his business interests in the construction industry including holding shares in a construction company.

Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed the Committee that, as previously agreed, he had informally met with representatives of the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) on 30 April 2024 and that a note of the meeting had been circulated.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the CMA asking it to undertake and publish research on the value and nature of Northern Ireland's trade as part of the wider UK internal market. The Committee also agreed to give further consideration to the relevant work of the CMA including e.g. competition in the home heating oil market and the associated economic implications for Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson informed the Committee that during the recent Assembly fracking debate, the Minister referred to a capital grant scheme for local businesses which will allow them to invest in energy efficiency measures.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on the energy efficiency business capital grant scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking a briefing on the outcome of the recent public consultation on the licensing of petroleum exploration and fracking.

The Chairperson reminded the Committee of the recent Assembly debate on the provision of period products in Further Education and other premises.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson would write a letter of thanks to Pat Catney whose Private Members Bill led to the provision of free period products in many public buildings.

The Chairperson advised the Committee that during the anticipated Assembly debate on the tourism strategy, he would not speak on behalf of the Committee as it had not yet received a related Departmental briefing and thus had not taken a view on this important policy area.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting of 24 April 2024.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Construction Skills Forum – oral evidence from the construction industry

Witnesses joined the meeting at 10.08am.

The Committee received oral and written evidence from:

Mark Spence, Chief Executive, Construction Employers Federation;

Fionnuala McKenna, Head of Strategic Engagement, Construction Futures NI; and

David Fry, Head of Public Affairs, Construction Employers Federation.

Key issues discussed included: retention of apprentices; perceptions of the construction industry; the need for better pathways into the construction industry; outreach programmes for education and communities; the need for an investment in infrastructure programme; the role of sub-contractors in respect of apprenticeships; and wage disparities.

Mike Nesbitt left the meeting at 10:46am

Witnesses left the meeting at 11.19am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a Departmental briefing on the Employer Skills Survey and in respect of the Skills Council annual report, when available.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department's seeking its views on the economic impact of the anticipated Defective Premises Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission RalSe to produce research comparing the apprenticeship framework in Northern Ireland with other relevant jurisdictions including consideration as to how issues in respect of accessibility, retention and wage differentials are addressed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Construction Employers Federation seeking sight of the 2024 Wages Promulgation produced by the Joint Council for the Building and Civil Engineering Industry (Northern Ireland). Business Crime Report – oral evidence from Retail NI

Witnesses joined the meeting at 11.21am.

The Committee received oral and written evidence from:

Glyn Roberts, Chief Executive Retail NI;

Helen Wall, Vice President Retail NI; and

Chris O'Reilly, Director, Retail Zoo.

Key issues discussed included: the high-level of shoplifting crime; the challenges in respect of retail crime in Belfast City Centre; the possible use of AI and facial recognition technology; the need for related PSNI KPIs; the need for an education

campaign in respect of the cost of shoplifting crime; the need for the continuation of the High Street taskforce; and issues in respect of the concentration of non-standard emergency accommodation.

Phillip McGuigan left at 11:49am

Gary Middleton declared an interest in respect of his prior involvement in the development and delivery of the high Street Taskforce as a junior Executive Minister.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson should write to the First Minister and deputy First Minister highlighting concerns in respect of retail crime and indicating the Committee's support for the restoration of the High Street Taskforce.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson should write to the Minister for Communities highlighting concerns in respect of retail crime and the inappropriate concentration of non-standard emergency accommodation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson should write to the Minister for Justice highlighting concerns in respect of retail crime and suggesting that: an advertising and public education campaign be undertaken regarding the costs of retail crime; appropriate amendments be made to the anticipated Miscellaneous Justice Bill and Sentencing Bill in respect of offences against retail employees; and appropriate KPIs be adopted in respect of retail crime as driver for Department of Justice policy and PSNI practice.

6. Budget 2024-25 - Oral evidence - Department for the Economy

As indicated above, this oral evidence session was deferred until 5 June 2024.

7. RalSe – Sub-Regional Economic Issues - Written Briefing

The Committee noted the Assembly Research paper on sub-regional differences in respect of earnings, employment and productivity.

8. Correspondence

10.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

10.2 Dual Market Access

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response relating to the tendering of support roles in respect of dual market access.

10.3 Air Connectivity Research

The Committee noted a Departmental response to Committee queries in respect of air connectivity research undertaken by York Aviation. This research appears to have identified strategic air routes and Departmental policy levers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek sight of the research and an oral briefing on air connectivity and strategic routes.

10.4 Euro 2028 - GVA

Noted: The Committee noted a response regarding Euro 2028 and the use of GVA as a measure of the economic impact.

10.5 Magee Taskforce

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Minister indicating that a briefing will be scheduled with the Ulster University Magee Expansion Taskforce.

10.6 MRPQ Common Framework

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the economic impact of the Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications (MRPQ) common framework.

10.7 Studio Ulster

The Committee considered a Departmental response including a copy of the Gateway Review for Studio Ulster.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek to arrange a visit to Studio Ulster.

10.8 Utility Regulator Decarbonisation Bill

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Utility Regulator to queries in respect of the Utility Regulator Decarbonisation Bill.

10.9 Grid Connection Charges Review

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Utility Regulator to queries in respect of a grid connection charges review.

10.10 EU regulations- Single Electricity Market

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of changes to EU regulations relating to the Single Electricity Market.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Utility Regulator seeking its views on the relevant EU SEM regulations.

10.11 EU regulations- Wholesale Energy Market

The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the House of Lords Committee to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero in respect of EU regulations designed to improve the Union's protection against market manipulation in the wholesale energy market and improve the Union's electricity market design.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Utility Regulator seeking its views on this matter.

10.12 EU regulations- Energy Labelling of Tumble Dryers.

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence in respect of EU regulations relating to the energy labelling of tumble dryers.

10.13 EU regulations- Eco-design for Smartphones

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence in respect of EU regulations relating to the eco-design requirements for smartphones etc.

10.14 Other EU regulations

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence on EU regulations relating to reporting requirements in the fields of food and food ingredients, outdoor noise, patients' rights, and radio equipment.

10.15 EU regulations- Safety of Toys

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence regarding EU regulations relating to the safety of toys.

10.16 Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism

Noted: The Committee noted House of Lords correspondence raising concerns in respect of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism.

10.17 Tenth Report of the ESR

Noted: The Committee noted the tenth report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

10.18 Invitation from the Joint Oireachtas Committee

The Committee considered an invitation from the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the islands to undertake an informal meeting with the Committee for the Economy on Wednesday, 19 June 2024 in Parliament Buildings. The informal meeting would consider oral evidence from representatives of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) on its report on 'Gender and Labour Market Inclusion on the Island of Ireland'.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to undertake the informal meeting and host an informal lunch with the Oireachtas Committee.

10.19 Report on Zero Carbon Homes

The Committee considered a request from the Forum for Better Homes NI to brief the Committee on the report on zero carbon homes.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reply and advise that these matters were better referred to the Committee for Communities and the Committee for Finance who have responsibility in respect of housing.

10.20 Belfast Works Connect

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from Belfast Works Connect regarding the anticipated loss of UK Shared Prosperity Funding.

10.21 Maritime UK Awards

The Committee considered an invitation from North Channel Wind to attend the Maritime UK Awards at Titanic Belfast on the 5 June 2024

Agreed: The Committee agreed to decline the invitation.

10.22 Access the Expert seminar

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to the Access the Expert seminar, 'Environmental challenges – rethinking low carbon bioenergy solutions', on Thursday 25 April 2024.

10.23 British Holiday Homes and Parks Association

Noted: The Committee noted further feedback from the British Holiday Homes and Parks Association on its informal meeting with the Chairperson on 23 April 2024.

10.24 Association of British Insurers

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Association of British Insurers (ABI) in regard to motor insurance premiums.

10.25 Regulation of UK Universities

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual in respect of the regulation of UK universities.

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a draft of its Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek briefings from: Dr Lisa Wilson, Nevin Economic Research Institute; Dr Conor Patterson, Newry and Mourne Co-operative and Enterprise Agency; Dr David Jordan, Productivity Institute; and Professor David Rooney, Centre for Advanced Sustainable Energy.

Agreed: The Committee noted that the representatives of the Youth Assembly would attend its joint concurrent meeting with the Committee for Education on 29 May 2024. The Committee agreed to attend an

informal lunch with the Youth Assembly following the conclusion of that joint concurrent meeting.

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

10. Any Other Business

The Chairperson reminded Members of the CMA event scheduled for 12:30pm in the Long Gallery.

There was no other business.

11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Committee for the Economy will be at 10.00am on Wednesday 8 May 2024 in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:22 pm.

Gary Middleton MLA

Deputy Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

8 May 2024