



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 12 June 2024

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings Belfast

Present: Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Present via video-conferencing:

Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Apologies: Mr Mike Nesbitt MLA

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Ms SORCHA Eastwood MLA

In Attendance: Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Anthea Matthews (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Craig Mealey (Clerical Supervisor)

Michael Doren (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 that in written answer AQW 12803/22-27, in respect of sub-regional plans, the Minister had indicated that these would be a series of actions for the Department and its ALBs. The Minister had also advised that the sub-regional plans were just the first stage and that "there will be a need for greater cross-government action to tackle persistent economic issues".

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee is to be briefed by the Department on the sub-regional plans in the autumn.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the sub-regional plans, in particular how these would augment existing district council (and other) economic sub-regional plans with a view to determining the nature of the anticipated related autumn briefing.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 5 June 2024.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Hospitality Ulster - Oral evidence on the Cost of Living Crisis

Witnesses joined the meeting at 10:05am.

The Committee received oral and written evidence from:

- Eamon McCusker, Owner of AM:PM restaurant;
- Colin Neill, CEO, Hospitality Ulster; and
- Joel Neill, Director of Operations, Hospitality Ulster.

Key issues discussed included: the current challenges facing the hospitality industry in Northern Ireland; the impact of increasing staff costs; the level of business rates in Northern Ireland compared to other jurisdictions and options for rates relief; options for reducing VAT for the sector; the impact of the hospitality sector on skills development; the need for improved public and other transport services to support hospitality; changing trends in consumer behaviour; and the possible role of the High Street Taskforce.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

Witnesses left the meeting at 11:03am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Finance and the Minister for the Economy seeking: an update on progress in respect of the devolution of VAT; commentary on Hospitality Ulster's suggestion in respect of a VAT reduction pilot programme linked to the Enhanced Investment Zone; and commentary in respect of new models for business rates including variable multipliers by business sector and rural business rates relief.

Agreed: The Committee noted the impact that the hospitality sector has on skills development and agreed to write to the Department suggesting Hospitality Ulster's inclusion in the Labour Relations Agency

Engagement Forum for Employers and its representation on the Skills Council.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the First Minister and deputy First Minister expressing its concerns about the ongoing difficulties faced by the hospitality sector and indicating its support for a related action plan to be developed and delivered by the High Street Taskforce.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Translink to express its concerns about the issues facing the hospitality sector which are exacerbated by the lack of transport infrastructure in support of the night time economy and to indicate its support for enhanced and regular night movers' services. The Committee also agreed to seek an informal meeting with Translink and representatives from the hospitality sector in order to discuss these issues.

7. UU Economic Policy Centre - Oral evidence on Tourism

Witnesses joined the meeting at 11:07am.

The Committee received oral and written evidence from:

- Gareth Hetherington, Director, UU Economic Policy Centre; and
- Eoin Magennis, Principal Economist, UU Economic Policy Centre.

Key issues discussed included: the marketing challenge facing the promotion of tourism in Northern Ireland; the different tourism market segments and their relative importance in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; air connectivity and transport infrastructure; successful tourism brands; the need for regional balance; the importance of clustering private sector providers; the economic impact of large sporting events; and the impact of the Electronic Travel Authorisation system.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

Witnesses left the meeting at 12:00noon.

8. Department for the Economy – Oral evidence on the Onshore Petroleum Licensing Policy consultation

Departmental officials joined the meeting at 12:01pm.

The Committee received oral and written evidence from:

- Jimmy Graham, Head of Business, Gas, Minerals and Petroleum, Energy Group;
- Lorraine Fleming, Minerals and Petroleum Branch, Energy Group; and
- Michael Bradley, Minerals and Petroleum Branch, Energy Group.

Key issues discussed included: the feedback from the consultation on onshore petroleum licensing; the moratorium on onshore petroleum licensing; and the treatment of outstanding applications.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

Officials left the meeting at 12:05pm.

9. Delegated Legislation - The Insolvency Order

The Committee considered a statutory rule laid in draft and relating to eligibility in respect of Debt Relief Orders.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity and a timeline for the legislation to remove the £90 application fee for access to the Debt Relief scheme.

The Committee agreed the following motion:

“That the Committee for the Economy considered SR 2024/0000 The Insolvency (Monetary Limits) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 and subject to the ESR’s report, recommended that it be affirmed by the Assembly.”

10. RalSe - Written briefings

Noted: The Committee noted written Assembly Research briefing papers relating to Northern Ireland's trade figures and those of other United Kingdom regions; and apprenticeships and frameworks for support in Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions.

11. Correspondence

11.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

11.2 Miscarriage leave and pay rights

The Committee considered a summary of the consultation responses (from December 2022) on proposals to introduce miscarriage leave and pay rights to workers and employees (from the 1st day of employment) who have experienced a miscarriage up to the end of the 23rd week of pregnancy with a notice period of 1 week if the leave is taken 8 weeks or more after the bereavement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department indicating that it supports the proposal to extend these employment rights in line with the consultation.

11.3 Carers paid and unpaid leave

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of carers paid and unpaid leave and flexible working.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to Carers NI.

11.4 Critical Raw Materials – EU Regulations

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of EU Regulations relating to Critical Raw Materials.

11.5 Greenhouse Gas Emissions – EU Regulations

Noted: The Committee noted a response in respect of EU Regulations relating to Greenhouse Gas Emissions. The Department noted that Northern Ireland continues to operate within the EU Emissions Trading Scheme for electricity generation and the related consequences. The Committee also noted that similar requirements may also be applied by the UK-wide Emission Trading Scheme.

11.6 Enhanced Flood Relief Scheme

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response confirming that no Treasury oversight would be required in respect of a ministerial direction relating to the enhanced flood relief scheme.

11.7 NSMC Statement

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister advising of a correction to an NSMC statement.

11.8 InterTrade Ireland Annual Review

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the InterTrade Ireland annual review of activities and annual report and accounts for 2022.

11.9 City and Growth Deals – Early Phasing

Noted: The Committee noted a DoF response in respect of City and Growth Deals and early phasing of support. The Committee noted that DoF advised that a variation to the UKG governance had been adopted

which would allow funding to flow at individual Outline Business Case (OBC) agreement rather than requiring all projects in a Deal to have achieved OBC sign-off.

11.10 Childcare labour supply pressures

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence indicating the childcare/childminding training offer that is currently available and advising that the Department for the Economy is working with the Department of Education to consider the scope for more short-term interventions to respond to childcare labour supply pressures.

11.11 Inter Departmental work on Childcare

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence declining to provide detailed information as to how departments are working together in order to deliver on the Childcare Strategy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Education and Minister for the Economy seeking assurance and explanation as to how they will encourage departments to work together to co-ordinate the delivery of the Childcare Strategy.

11.12 Childminding Support

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Health in respect of childminding support.

11.13 NICMA

Noted: The Committee noted NICMA's response in respect of childminding academies and Labour Market Partnership work.

11.14 Intra-UK Electricity Interconnection

The Committee considered a response from the Utility Regulator on the cap and floor mechanism and intra-UK electricity interconnection issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking a briefing on the outcome of its recent consultation on smart metering and grid flexibility including interconnection.

11.15 Phoenix Energy open event

The Committee considered an invitation to a Phoenix Energy open event in Castlecoole Park on Wednesday 19 June 2024 on hybrid heating systems.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to decline the invitation and to seek to reschedule the visit to another time.

11.16 Physician's Associates

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence forwarded by the Committee for Education in respect of limited job opportunities outside of Belfast for physician's associates.

11.17 Post-19 SEN Provision

Noted: The Committee noted further information on a campaign relating to post-19 SEN provision.

11.18 Forum for Better Homes NI

The Committee considered a request to brief from the Forum for Better Homes NI on decarbonisation of homes and related skills development.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek to arrange the briefing with the Forum for Better Homes.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reschedule a Departmental evidence session on technology clusters in order to include recently developed action plans.

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

13. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

14. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 19 June 2024 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:13pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

19 June 2024