



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 5 June 2024

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings Belfast

Present:

Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

Apologies:

Present via video-conferencing:

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

In Attendance:

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Anthea Matthews (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Craig Mealey (Clerical Supervisor)

The meeting commenced in public session at 10:05am.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Declarations of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson thanked Members for attending the joint concurrent meeting and the informal lunch with the Youth Assembly on 29 May 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Youth Assembly thanking its members for the positive and enjoyable engagement.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting and joint concurrent meeting of the Economy Committee and Education Committee of 29 May 2024.

5. Matters Arising

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Dr Hughes, thanking her for her evidence and seeking further information on the format of the careers support focused on children and young people with SEN etc. which was envisaged in her report; and seeking sight of her recent publication comparing careers support practices in 15 different jurisdictions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to both the Economy and Education Departments: seeking sight of the Ministerial joint departmental work programme including timelines covering the development of the all-age careers service and the 14-19 framework; suggesting that targets and timelines be developed for careers provision in respect of its impact including the extent to which it improves inclusion for care experienced young people, looked after children and children and young people with

SEN; and seeking further information on the training pilot for careers advisers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write: to the Speaker thanking him for permitting the use of the plenary chamber and to the Committee for Education thanking its Members for their participation in the joint concurrent committee.

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

Officials joined the meeting at 10:07am.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Committee received oral and written evidence from:

- Johanna Park, Deputy Finance Director, Management Services and Regulation Group, Department for the Economy;
- Susan Butler, Head of Financial Planning, Management Services and Regulation Group, Department for the Economy; and
- Niamh McGarvey, Head of In-Year Budget Management, Management Services and Regulation Group, Department for the Economy.

Key issues discussed included: the June Monitoring round submission; funding for the Belfast Region City and Growth Deal; AME budgets in respect of student loans and RHI; unallocated funding proposals in respect of Skills; October Monitoring and anticipated allocations to the Transformation Fund; reductions in student support and proposals for related eligibility revision.

Philip McGuigan joined the meeting at 10:26am.

Officials left the meeting at 10:29am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on the funding allocations to FE colleges; the timing of allocations to support Magee expansion; and support for RHI inquiry recommendations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking it to produce an Estimates Memorandum – similar to those produced in Westminster

- providing 3 years previous data and 3 years of predictions of spending for each significant budget line and also summarising and

specifying key financial risks that the Department is expecting in the coming year(s).

Agreed: The Committee agreed asking it to provide a briefing in the autumn of 2024 on the outworking of the internal spending review which each department undertakes every summer, in order to inform the Committee's scrutiny of the 2025-26 budget.

7. Insolvency and Director Disqualification - Oral evidence from the Department for the Economy

Officials joined the meeting at 10:33am.

The Committee received oral and written evidence from:

- Richard Monds, Director of Insolvency, Department for the Economy; and
- Jack Reid, Deputy Principal, Insolvency, Department for the Economy.

Key issues discussed included: an overview of the work of the Department's Insolvency Service and proposed changes to legislation designed to maintain parity with England and Wales in respect of insolvency practices; and the timeline for the proposed legislation.

Officials left the meeting at 10:44am.

8. Correspondence

8.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

8.2 Impact of AI in sub-regions

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the impact of Artificial Intelligence on industries concentrated in sub-regions of Northern Ireland.

8.3 Air Connectivity

The Committee considered the York Aviation report on air connectivity including comparisons of the performance of NI airports with Dublin airport and other equivalent regions in respect of air connectivity.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a Departmental briefing on the way forward for air connectivity.

8.4 Capital Spending

The Committee considered the May ISNI report on capital spending by DfE.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and ISNI and ask them to include Higher Education and City & Growth Deal capital spending in its monthly reports.

8.5 Annual Report of the Certification Officer

Noted: The Committee noted the 2022-23 annual report of the Certification Officer.

8.6 Vires for the Utility Regulator

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Minister for AERA in respect of proposed changes to the vires for the Utility Regulator in support of the transition to net zero.

8.7 Retail Crime

The Committee considered correspondence from the Justice Minister in respect of retail crime and proposed legislation relating to assaults on those carrying out a service for the public.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to Retail NI.

8.8 UCAS

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from UCAS, forwarded by the Education Committee, and previously considered at the Economy Committee meeting of 15 May 2024.

8.9 Utility Regulator – Grid Costs

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Utility Regulator in respect of the capital costs of grid refurbishments and the impact on bills.

8.10 North South Interconnector

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from Eirgrid indicating that further information on the progress of the North South interconnector is to be provided.

8.11 Critical Raw Materials

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of further correspondence in respect of EU regulations relating to critical raw materials. The Committee also noted that the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee is to produce a report on this subject shortly.

8.12 Skill-Up

The Committee considered correspondence from a concerned individual in respect of the Skill-Up programme which ceased on 31 March 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the way forward for Skill-Up

8.13 Caleb's Protest

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to Caleb's Protest – regarding post 19 SEN legislation – on Wednesday 19 June 2024 10:30am at Parliament Buildings.

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to postpone its informal meeting including a briefing from ESRI which had been scheduled for 19 June 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to revise its agenda for its meeting in Foyle so as to include a briefing from the UU Magee Expansion Taskforce on 18 September 2024.

10. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 12 June 2024 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:48am.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

12 June 2024