



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 11 December 2024

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Stormont

Present:

- Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)
- Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Ms Diana Armstrong MLA
- Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA
- Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
- Mr David Honeyford MLA
- Mr Philip McGuigan MLA
- Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA
- Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

In Attendance:

- Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
- Anthea Matthews (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Michael Doran (Clerical Officer)

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

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Declarations of Interest

Jonathan Buckley, Phillip Brett, Kate Nicholl and Padraig Delargy declared their interests in respect of current student loan debts.

David Honeyford declared an interest in respect of his children's student loan debts.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Credit Union Reform

The Chairperson advised the Committee that during Question Time, the Minister had referred to a credit union reform package that, unexpectedly, is to be taken forward in the current mandate.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the timescale, the need for and nature of the likely credit union reforms.

The Committee adopted a revised order for agenda items.

4. Budget 2025-26 - Ministerial evidence session

The following joined the meeting at 10:02am:

- Conor Murphy MLA, Minister for the Economy;
- Ian Snowden, Permanent Secretary, Department for the Economy (DfE);

- Sharon Hetherington, Finance Director, DfE; and
- Johanna Park, Deputy Finance Director, DfE.

Key issues discussed included: the Department's 2025-26 budget submissions and associated impact assessments; Magee expansion; regional balance; dual market access; business support and the role of the Local Economic Partnerships; the restructuring of Invest NI; City of Derry Airport (CoDA) business cases and air connectivity; the Electronic Travel Authorisation scheme; tourism; renewable energy and planning constraints; the Pathfinder programme; public sector landbanks; the Good Jobs Bill and carers leave; productivity; the biomethane strategy; RHI closure; corporation tax; and Ministerial Directions.

Gary Middleton declared an interest in that his wife is a board member of CoDA.

The Chairperson thanked the Minister and officials for their evidence.

The Minister and his officials left the meeting at 11:36am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the revised budget submissions relating to the 9% and 12% budget increments.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department; seeking clarity on the timing of the introduction of the Employment Bill and delegated legislation on related matters including paid/unpaid carers leave.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on and the timing of the development of the biomethane strategy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking commentary on the likely extent of the RHI settlement costs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reconsider tabled correspondence: on the Utility Regulator Bill; the review of the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment regulatory function; and post-19 SEN.

Proceedings were suspended at 11:39am.

Kate Nicholl left the meeting at 11:39am.

Proceedings resumed at 11:50am.

5. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 4 December 2024.

6. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

7. Student Loans / Maintenance Grants – Departmental evidence session

Officials joined the meeting at 11:50am.

- Mark Lee - Director of Higher Education, DfE;
- Graham Miller - Assistant Director of Higher Education, DfE;
- Jonny O’Callaghan – Head of HE Student Support Finance, DfE; and
- Siobhan Martin - Deputy Principal, DfE.

Key issues discussed included: student tuition and maintenance loan policy; the Higher Education funding review; communicating the terms and conditions of student loans; loan options for NI students studying for post-graduate qualifications and studying in the EU.

The Chairperson recorded concerns in respect of the HE funding review, Magee expansion and the potential for an adverse effect on QUB.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 12:16pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department: seeking information on loan rate fluctuations; seeking clarity on the terms and conditions information provided to prospective students; and suggesting greater clarity on repayments including the provision of a student loan calculator.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the National Union of Students – Union of Students in Ireland and the Student Loan Company seeking written commentary on the administration of student loan repayments.

8. Correspondence

8.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

8.2 Technology Sector Action Plans

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response on technology sector action plans including information on the Cluster Acceleration Programme and a further clustering policy for innovative sectors.

8.3 Skills Strategy / Sector Action Plans

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response on how the Skills Strategy will support the technology sector action plans.

8.4 Disability Support Service

The Committee considered a Departmental response on the Disability Support Service including the 2018 ETI report and a redacted version of the RSM report on the Training for Success Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department again seeking clarity as to the Key Performance Indicators for the Disability Support Service and the performance of providers against those KPIs.

8.5 Tourism Vision and Action Plan

The Committee noted a Departmental response on the draft Tourism Vision and draft 10-year Tourism Action Plan including some details on the development of the peace tourism ToRs; Visit Derry OBC; Destination Stewardship; social media spending, and the review of the certification of alternative accommodation providers.

Sinead McLaughlin recorded her concern in respect of remarks attributed to the Chief Executive of Tourism NI on the nature of the Peacemaker's Museum.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department; seeking information on the peace tourism working group membership and its ToRs as well as an update on the Visit Derry OBC.

8.6 Onshore Petroleum Exploration

Noted: The Committee noted confirmation of Executive approval for a ban on all forms of onshore petroleum exploration and production including fracking.

8.7 EU Regulation: General Product Safety

The Committee noted correspondence from the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee on an EU regulation on general product safety which comes into effect on 13 December 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and to the Northern Ireland Consumer Council for comment on the general product safety regulations.

8.8 Anti-Poverty Strategy

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for Communities to DfE in respect of the Anti-Poverty Strategy.

8.9 SEBCA – Cross-Border Co-operation

The Committee considered information on the South East HE/FE/Industry Cross-Border Alliance (SEBCA) involving Workplus – a Peace Plus project designed to support cross-border clustering and educational pathways at Level 4.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) to give evidence on this and related cross-border work.

8.10 Peace Plus Change Makers Fund

Noted: The Committee noted information regarding the Peace Plus Change Makers Fund which opens for applications in January 2025.

8.11 SSE submission: draft PfG

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from SSE plc to the draft PfG consultation.

8.12 Peace Summit submission: draft PfG

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Peace Summit to the draft PfG consultation.

8.13 RHI tariff

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence between the Renewable Heat Association NI and the Department in respect of revisions to the RHI tariff etc..

8.14 Invitation: Magee Expansion Taskforce

The Committee considered an invitation to the Chairperson to attend the formal launch of the final Magee Expansion Taskforce report on 16 December 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to attend, diary permitting.

8.15 Tabled Correspondence: Free the Night

Agreed: The Committee considered correspondence from Sinead McLaughlin MLA and agreed to schedule an evidence session from the Free the Night group.

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to revise the timing of its meeting on 8 January 2024 in order to include an evidence session from DfE on the Great British Energy Bill

Agreed: The Committee agreed its forward work programme, as amended.

10. Any Other Business

Noted: The Committee noted procedural advice from the Clerk.

There was no other business.

11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 8 January 2024 at 10:00am in the Minor Hall, Magee Campus.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to continue in closed session at 12:36pm.

12. Committee Strategic Plan

Agreed: The Committee agreed its strategic plan.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:39pm

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

8 January 2025