



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 5 February 2025

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament buildings, Stormont.

Present: Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Present via video conferencing:

Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Apologies: Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

In Attendance: Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Anthea Matthews (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)
Stuart Gilmour (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in public session at 10:03am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

Pádraig Delargy declared an interest in that he was a past participant in a Skill Up course on productivity.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 New Minister

The Chairperson reminded Members that Dr Caoimhe Archibald MLA became the Minister for the Economy on 3 February 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the former Minister Conor Murphy MLA, thanking him for his work as Minister for the Economy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the new Minister welcoming her to her post.

3.2 Committee Membership

The Chairperson noted that Philip McGuigan MLA would no longer be a member of the Economy Committee from 10 February 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Mr McGuigan MLA thanking him for his service to the Committee.

3.3 Use of Consultants

The Chairperson advised that in response to AQW 21154 the Minister had referred to the use of consultants in order to undertake: an audit etc. of HMS Caroline; an evaluation of the Higher Education Innovation Fund; and work relating to the Department's Organisational Development and Transformation Programme. The Chairperson also advised of a review of the Single Electricity Market

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information in respect of:

- the audit etc. of HMS Caroline;
- the evaluation of the Higher Education Innovation Fund; and
- the Department's Organisational Development and Transformation Programme.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department seeking information in respect of the review of the Single Electricity Market.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 29 January 2025.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. 2024-25 Spending Out-turn and 2025-26 Draft Budget – Departmental evidence session

The following officials joined the meeting at 10:06am:

- Johanna Park, Head of Financial Management DfE
- Susan Butler, Head of In-Year Budget Management DfE
- Niamh McGarvey, Head of Future Years Planning DfE

Kate Nicholl joined the meeting at 10:24am

Gary Middleton declared an interest in that his wife is on the board of City of Derry Airport (CoDA).

Key issues discussed included: the 2024-25 outturn including headroom of £10m capital and £7m resource as well as a ring-fenced DEL reduction of £280m; proposals to address pressures in the 2025-26 draft budget of around £80m through earmarked funding plus a 7.9% reduction in resource DEL allocations; anticipated City and Growth Deal capital allocations; pressures associated with pay and National Insurance contributions; funding for the Regional Economic Fund, skills and SEN 19+ provision; the need for clarity on the resource bids that were not met including for the student maintenance grant increase; and the capital bids that were not met including the Invest NI property programme.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 10:40am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking:

- a revised version of Appendix E – clearly indicating the resource pressures that have been met and identifying the resources bids that were unsuccessful;
- further explanation in respect of Appendix F and the 7.9% reduction including: information on the impact assessments by budget line for the reduction as well as further clarity as to what activities the Entrepreneurship, Innovation & Economic Strategy, Skills and Education Group Including FE Student Support and Apprenticeships, Vocational Education & Skills budget lines will

cover and how the level of activity in respect of apprenticeships and skills supports etc. will change from 2025-26 compared to 2024-25;

- clarity in respect of the budget line providing support for CoDA and an update on the progress of the relevant business cases;
- clarity in respect of resource and capital money going to the universities – UU and QUB;
- an explanation as to the anticipated pressures from NICS and FE pay deals and increased National Insurance employers' contributions; and
- an explanation in respect of the allocation of investment support by Invest NI within the Belfast City Council area; Belfast Metropolitan Area and outside of this.

7. Domestic Abuse Safe Leave consultation – Departmental evidence session

The following officials joined the meeting at 10:43am:

- Colin Jack - Director of Business and Employment Regulation Division, DfE;
- Dearbhla Redmond - Employment Relations Policy and Legislation Branch, DfE;
and
- Geraldine Lavery - Employment Relations Policy and Legislation Branch, DfE

Key issues discussed included: the response rate to the consultation; the timeline for the development of the regulations and guidance; projections for the uptake of safe leave; the need for review and assessment of the success of the regulations; advice to workers, employees and businesses; the costs to businesses; the absence of mandatory reporting arrangements; existing Labour Relations Agency guidance, the experience in other jurisdictions; and the potential for misuse of the new provisions.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 11:38am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking a further update on the development of the regulations and guidance for businesses.

8. Delegated Legislation - Public Interest Disclosure Regulations

The Committee considered the statutory rule entitled: - SR 2025/13 The Public Interest Disclosure (Prescribed Persons) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025 and agreed the following motion:

Agreed: “That the Committee for the Economy has considered SR 2025/13 The Public Interest Disclosure (Prescribed Persons) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025 and subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, has no objection to the rule”

9. Correspondence

9.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

9.2 Minister’s Economic Vision

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Department’s progress report in respect of the Minister’s Economic Vision.

9.3 Grid Connection Charging Framework

The Committee considered a Departmental response on the grid connection charging framework.

9.4 Grid Connection Charging Policy Consultation

The Committee also considered further correspondence from the Department announcing a 12-week consultation on electricity grid connection charging policy

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking: clarity in respect of the high cost cap which is to be based on GB data and how this is to be updated over time; clarity on the timescale for RP7 upgrades which will reduce connection costs; and a briefing from the Department on the feedback to the consultation.

9.5 Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response on the Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill and childcare issues.

9.6 Labour Relations Agency Engagement forum

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department on the Employment Bill consultation queries including the ToRs etc. for the Labour Relations Agency engagement forum. The response indicated that the Department is not considering a holiday pay claim backstop.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the costs of what appears to be a superparity approach in respect of holiday pay claims.

9.7 LCM Westminster Employment Bill

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Department advising of an expected Legislative Consent Motion in respect of the Westminster Employment Bill. The LCM is expected to deal with the role of the Fair Work Agency and the enforcement of labour market legislation.

9.8 Marie Curie NI

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from Marie Curie NI to the Minister seeking measures in the Employment Bill to support a statutory entitlement to 2-weeks paid bereavement leave.

9.9 FE Annual Reports.

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response to Committee queries on FE Annual Reports reporting format.

9.10 ISNI Investment Activity Report January 2025

Noted: The Committee noted the ISNI Investment Activity Report for January 2025.

9.11 Revisions to Investment Activity Reports

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of revisions to the monthly investment activity reports in respect of City and Growth Deals.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Finance indicating its concerns in respect of the absence of tracking of capital projects in particular those associated with City and Growth Deals; and suggesting direction be provided to the Strategic Investment Board to revise the monthly reports accordingly.

9.12 DfE Budget

Noted: The Committee noted a request from the Committee for Finance for a written submission on the Committee's views on the DfE budget by 28 February 2025.

9.13 UU RoI Students

The Committee considered Ulster University's response in respect of the numbers of students from RoI, including from Donegal and related projections following Magee expansion.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to UU noting the higher proportion of RoI students attending Coleraine and Belfast and seeking a breakdown of those students' course choices and clarification as to whether the relevant courses are or will also be offered in Magee.

9.14 Ulster University – Numeracy Education

The Committee considered a request to brief from Ulster University on the subject of a numeracy education intervention funded by the Department.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to UU seeking sight of the relevant report and to consider the need for an oral evidence session at that time.

9.15 Caleb's Cause NI

The Committee considered a request from Alma White, Caleb's Cause NI for information on funding and governance for the provision of Post-19 SEN.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to DfE seeking clarity on the matter.

9.16 UK Internal Market Act

Noted: The Committee noted an announcement that the UK Government has launched a consultation on the operation of the UK Internal Market Act.

9.17 Employment Tribunal Report

Noted: The Committee noted a report produced by a previous litigant in person regarding her experiences with the employment tribunal system and perceived lack of support for litigants with disabilities.

9.18 Employment Tribunal Complaint.

Noted: The Committee noted further correspondence in respect of an employment tribunal complaint.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister inviting her to brief the Committee on 9 April 2025 in respect of the budget, legislation and her policy plans for the remainder of the mandate.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to both Ministers inviting them to brief at the joint concurrent meeting of the Economy and Education Committees on 14 May 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for Education seeking to arrange regular 6 monthly joint concurrent meetings.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek to schedule a briefing with Fibrus on reconnection issues following storm Eowyn.

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

11. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

12. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 12 February 2025 at 10:00am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings Stormont.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:49am.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

12 February 2025