



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 11 September 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 Colin Crawford MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

**Present via video-conferencing:**

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

**In Attendance:**

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Anthea Matthews (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Michael Doran (Clerical Officer)

Barbara Daly (Clerical Officer)

Sarah Preece (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in public session at 10:02am.

## **1. Apologies**

There were no apologies.

## **2. Chairperson's Business**

The Chairperson welcomed new members to the Committee: Kate Nicholl MLA and Colin Crawford MLA.

The Chairperson welcomed the publication of the Executive's draft Programme for Government (PfG) and noted the prominent position that economic development is to play in the PfG.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on the references in the draft PfG to: the £150m Investment Zone; the childcare skills academy; the skills academy; the review of the Energy Strategy; and proposed changes to the electricity grid connection charging policy.

The Chairperson informed the Committee that he and the Deputy Chairperson had been invited to an informal meeting with the Permanent Secretary in respect of the 2024-25 Business Plan.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on the references in the 2024-25 Business Plan to the social enterprise action plan and the 3 year apprenticeship action plan. The Committee also agreed to invite the Department to brief the Committee on the 2024-25 Business Plan.

### **3. Draft Minutes**

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

### **4. Matters Arising**

The Committee noted that the minutes of 5 September 2024 included a response from the Department indicating that the Labour Relations Agency was responsible for the membership of its Employers' Forum.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Labour Relations Agency seeking the addition of Hospitality Ulster to its Employers' Forum.

### **5. Northern Ireland Skills Council (NISC) – oral and written evidence session**

Witnesses joined the meeting at 10:03am.

The Committee received oral and written evidence from:

- Kathleen O'Hare, Chairperson of NISC;
- Gordon Parkes, Chairperson of the Green Skills Delivery group;
- Caroline van der Feltz, Chairperson of the SEDI (Skills, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) sub-committee;
- Deborah O'Hare, Chairperson of the Education and Skills sub-committee; and
- Lorna McAdoo, Chairperson of the Digital Skills sub-committee.

Key issues discussed included: green energy skills and the potential for related job growth; digital skills; education and skills issues; skills equality, diversity and inclusion; lessons to be learned from similar agencies in other jurisdictions; measures to address economic inactivity; the impact of migration policy on employment and the development of a skilled workforce; the existing regional and sectoral differences within Northern Ireland and the need for an overarching strategy to provide skills equality and inclusion; the development of apprenticeships including other routes into employment for all ages; careers advice focusing on skills; scaling

up successful skills pilot schemes; and the NISC response to the draft PfG consultation.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The Committee recorded its thanks to the NISC chairperson and members for their significant personal commitment to the improvement of skills for the current and future workforce.

Witnesses left the meeting at 11:39am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the NISC seeking sight of its Green Skills action plan and Digital action plan. The Committee also agreed to seek sight of NISC's advice to the Department in respect of addressing regional imbalance and its response to the draft PfG consultation.

The Committee recorded some concern in respect of the Department's failure to publish the Skills Strategy second monitoring report and the implications for the independence of the NISC.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department expressing its concerns and seeking sight of the second monitoring report of the Skills Strategy.

## **6. October Monitoring Round – Departmental oral and written evidence session**

Officials joined the meeting at 11:42am.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Committee received oral and written evidence from:

- Johanna Park, Head of Financial Management, 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 monitoring round submission and the Department's response to the Department of Finance budget information gathering exercise.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

Officials left the meeting at 11:55am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking a further breakdown of the Higher Education quality research capital allocation by university.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on the progress of the post-19 SEN transformation proposal including the likely timeline for approval.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the progress of the Fort George capital project seeking clarity on the underspend and the measures the Department is to take in order to bring the project back onto its timeline.

## **7. Financial Provisions Bill – Departmental oral and written evidence session**

Officials joined the meeting at 11:57am.

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 11:58am.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Committee received oral and written evidence from:

- Heidi-Beth Hudson, Economic Strategy Group, Department for the Economy;
- Giulia Ní Dhulchaointigh, Economic Strategy Group, Department for the Economy; and
- Laura McPolin, Economic Strategy Group, Department for the Economy.

Key issues discussed included: the feedback to the consultation on the Financial Provisions Bill.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

Officials left the meeting at 12:00noon.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department indicating that at this time it was content for the relevant aspects of the Bill to progress.

Proceedings were suspended at 12:00noon.

Proceedings resumed at 12:10pm.

Jonathan Buckley rejoined the meeting at 12:10pm

## **8. SL1 – Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Tariffs – Departmental oral and written evidence session**

Officials joined the meeting at 12:10pm.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- Sarah Brady, Director, Energy Operations, Department for the Economy; and
- Peter Neill, Head of Policy and Legislation Branch, Department for the Economy.

Key issues discussed included: revised RHI tariffs; the related consultation report; and the revised costs associated with the non-domestic RHI scheme.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

Officials left the meeting at 12:40pm.

Gary Middleton left the meeting at 12:40pm

Kate Nicholl left the meeting at 12:40pm

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

- sight of the report on the previous RHI tariff consultation;
- sight of the calculations and research underpinning the revised tariffs;

- comparison information between the revised tariffs and those applied in similar schemes in the rest of the UK; and
- clarity on the number of RHI boilers that are likely to be non-profit making as a result of the tariff revision.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to write to the Department seeking: confirmation in respect of the level of AME costs of the revised tariffs and confirmation that the balance of the AME ring-fenced money will be used for other renewable energy purposes; confirmation of the actual cost of the scheme if closed in 2026; and a timeline of RHI tariffs from 2012 to the present.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to: seek further oral Departmental briefing on the revised RHI tariffs; give further consideration to other evidence on this subject as necessary; and to defer consideration of the SL1 until that time.

## **9. Correspondence**

### **9.1 Index**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

### **9.2 Additional Disability Support consultation**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Departmental correspondence on an addendum to the previously launched consultation on the integration of additional disability support within Departmental training programmes at Entry Level and Level One i.e. Skills for Life and Work.

### **9.3 DfE Research on Innovation**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of research on innovation supports and innovation language.

#### **9.4 DfE Research: Other topics**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of research on: employee ownership, hybrid working, GDP and flexible working.

#### **9.5 Invitation from Encirc**

The Committee considered an invitation to visit and request to brief from Encirc on the use of biomethane for glass container production.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to decline the invitation, owing to forward work programme pressures.

#### **9.6 Wind Energy Event**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an invitation to a wind energy event – on 25 September 2024, in the Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings.

#### **9.7 Pivotal Report**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of the Pivotal report on the NI Executive.

#### **9.8 NIHRC Newsletter**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission newsletter for August 2024.

### **10. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its Forward Work Programme.

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



Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy seeking an update on their joint working programme with a view to arranging a further joint concurrent meeting with the Committee for Education.

#### **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 18 September 2024 at 12:00noon in the Great Hall, Magee, Ulster University.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:54pm.

**Gary Middleton MLA**

**Vice-Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**18 September 2024**