



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 6 November 2024**

**Meeting Location:** Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Stormont

**Present:** Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

**Present via Video-Conferencing:**

Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

**Apologies:** Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr Philip McGuigan 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 10:02am.

## **1. Apologies**

Apologies were as indicated above.

## **2. Declarations of Interest**

Gary Middleton declared an interest as his wife is a board member of City of Derry Airport.

## **3. Chairperson's Business**

### **3.1 National Insurance Employers Contributions**

The Chairperson reminded the Committee of the Chancellor's budget statement which included changes to National Insurance employers' contributions.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to invite the Federation of Small Businesses and Hospitality Ulster to provide evidence to the Committee on the impact of changes to National Insurance employers contributions for their sectors.

### **3.2 Tuition Fee / Maintenance Loan Increase**

The Chairperson referred the Committee to recent news reports in respect of Higher Education tuition fee and maintenance loan increases in England. Tuition fees in that jurisdiction have been frozen since 2017, whereas in Northern Ireland, where fees are lower, they have increased with inflation since 2010-11.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity as to whether the Department is contemplating similar changes to Higher

Education tuition fees in order to secure the financial viability of the universities in Northern Ireland and in respect of increases to maintenance loans in order to assist students dealing with cost of living pressures.

### **3.3 City and Growth Deals**

The Chairperson welcomed the signing of the heads of terms of agreement for the City and Growth Deal for the Mid South West Region and congratulated Members who had lobbied for the unpausing of City and Growth Deals.

## **4. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 23 October 2024

## **5. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

## **6. Department for the Economy - Air Connectivity and Strategic Routes – oral and written evidence session**

The officials joined the meeting at 10:04am.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- Paul Grocott - Head of Economic Strategy Group, DfE; and
- Ian Maxwell - Grade 7, Tourism and Telecoms, DfE.

Key issues discussed included: the Public Service Obligation (PSO) business case for the air route from City of Derry Airport (CoDA) to Heathrow, to be renewed in January 2025; the anticipated March 2025 consultation on the new air route development policy; new route development proposals and increasing frequency for existing routes for all NI airports; co-operation between NI's airports; impact on regional balance; importance of DfI studies into connecting infrastructure and public

transport links for airports; importance of duty free income and Air Passenger Duty arrangements in respect of competition with Dublin airport; the need for flights from CoDA to Dublin airport; CoDA's position in respect of cross-border connectivity; ownership of CoDA; and the anticipated transfer of policy responsibility from 1 April 2025.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 10:57am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the CoDA business case; the PSO CoDA to Heathrow business case; and seeking an update on the transfer of policy responsibility and relevant statutory functions.

## **7. Department for the Economy - Disability Support Service (DSS) for Entry Level / Level One Courses – oral and written evidence session**

The officials joined the meeting at 10:58am.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- Clement Athanasiou, Director, Apprenticeships, Careers and Vocational Education, DfE;
- Kathryn McCamley, Deputy Director, Apprenticeships and Youth Training, Delivery and Performance, DfE;
- Catherine Powell, Head of Youth Inclusion, DfE; and
- Claire Thompson, Head of Post-School SEN Project, DfE.

Key issues discussed included: the consultation process including feedback from training providers and students; the demand for support and the need to meet individual student needs; the RSM report on DSS provision for Training for Skills; the reform of Skills for Life and Work; the measurement of outcomes for students; data - sharing issues in respect of transitioning students; communication issues in respect of the provision of support; transfer of DSS provision from contractors to training providers; the progress of the proposed post-19 SEN transformation provision; a

proposed £10m allocation including support for a related study of post-19 SEN needs; and the requirement for new SEN legislation.

Sinéad McLaughlin left the meeting at 11:38am

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 11:44am.

**Agreed:** The Committee welcomed the consultation and agreed that it generally supported the enhancement of DSS provision but agreed also to write to DfE seeking sight of the RSM report including information on Key Performance Indicator performance by contractors so as to better understand what success would look like for the proposed new arrangements.

## **8. Correspondence**

### **8.1 Index**

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

### **8.2 MAC review of the Seasonal Workers Visa**

The Committee considered a Departmental response on the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) review on the Seasonal Workers Visa which indicated that the Minister for AERA had also raised access to labour issues with DEFRA and suggested consideration be given to the introduction of a two-year occupation-specific bespoke visa route for the mushroom harvesting sector.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward this correspondence to NIMGA.

### **8.3 Enhanced Investment Zone submission**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Enhanced Investment Zone – a submission for which was reported as being in draft.

### **8.4 Towns Fund**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Parliamentary Under SoS for Housing Communities and Local Government which indicated that that no decision had yet been taken on providing Towns Fund support to Coleraine and the City of Derry, County Londonderry.

### **8.5 HE Student Leavers**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response on Higher Education student leavers from NI and their rate of return in recent years, pending a Departmental post-graduate award consultation briefing before Christmas.

### **8.6 Consultation on Insolvency**

**Noted:** The Committee noted information on a Departmental public consultation on legislation dealing with insolvency and director disqualification, pending a briefing on the feedback to the consultation.

### **8.7 GeoEnergy NI Project**

The Committee considered an invitation from DfE Geothermal Policy team to visit the GeoEnergy NI project on the Stormont Estate.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to undertake a visit in the new year.

### **8.8 Car Insurance Issues**

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of car insurance issues which indicated that Trading Standards NI has no remit in respect of claim management companies or car credit hire arrangements. In respect of car repair skills shortages – the Department advised that employers had struggled to fill 90% of vacancies largely owing to skills shortages.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister suggesting that consideration be given to bringing forward legislation to regulate claim management companies etc. in line with the rest of the UK.

### **8.9 Financial Conduct Authority**

The Committee considered a request from the FCA to informally meet the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson to discuss motor insurance issues.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the Chairperson could undertake this informal meeting, subject to his availability.

### **8.10 Trading Standards Service – Conveyancing in NI**

The Committee considered a Departmental response on “good practice” guidance in respect of estate agent information to support the sale of houses which had been introduced by the National Trading Standards Estate and Letting Agency Team.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Law Society of Northern Ireland.

### **8.11 Gateway Review of the 14-19 Framework.**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Education to DfE seeking further information on the gateway review and an update on the implementation of the 14-19 framework.

### **8.12 14-19 Framework**

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of the 14-19 Framework which indicated that the project had been given an amber rating and included limited information on related progress.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Committee for Education, for its information.

### **8.13 Alliance for Lifelong Learning**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Alliance for Lifelong Learning. An impact report on adult learning is to be published in March 2025.

### **8.14 Community Wealth Building**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of Community Wealth Building. A Social Enterprise Action Plan is to be published shortly.

### **8.15 Utility Regulator Bill.**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an update on the Utility Regulator (Preparation for Decarbonisation) Bill, pending a briefing in November 2024.



### **8.16 Harland and Wolff**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response clarifying that DfE owns Harland and Wolff PLC which is a dormant company with insurance liabilities and no assets. Whereas Harland and Wolff Group Holdings PLC is the holding company which is in administration and in which DfE has no stake nor any role in respect of its sale.

### **8.17 ISNI Report October 2024.**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the ISNI capital tracking system activity report for October 2024.

### **8.18 September 2024-25 OFO**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the September 2024-25 Outturn and Forecast Outturn report for all departments.

### **8.19 3-Year Budget Gathering Exercise**

**Noted:** The Committee noted information on the 3-year budget information gathering exercise commissioned by the Department of Finance, pending a Ministerial briefing in December.

### **8.20 Chairperson's Liaison Group update**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of a CLG update on additional resourcing from 2025-26 in order to support post-legislative scrutiny and enhanced scrutiny of delegated legislation.

### **8.21 PAC Work Programme**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the Public Accounts Committee's list of reports and work programme.

### **8.22 Electric Vehicles in NICS**

The Committee noted information on electric vehicles in NICS provided by the Committee for Infrastructure.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking information on e-vehicle uptake in respect of DfE's vehicle fleet.

### **8.23 Westminster Arbitration Bill**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Justice, in respect of its anticipated report on the Westminster Arbitration Bill which was described as having minimal implications for the Labour Relations Agency arbitration framework.

### **8.24 QUB Capital Spending**

The Committee considered information from Queen's University Belfast on its capital spending including only 1 year's information on £34m of Quality Research spending.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write again to QUB and seek further information on previous years capital spending.

### **8.25 UU Capital Spending**

The Committee considered information from Ulster University on its capital spending including only one year's information on £15.5m of Quality Research spending.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write again to UU and seek further information on previous years

#### **8.26 NI Screen Commissions Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the Northern Ireland Screen Commission's Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24.

#### **8.27 CMA's 3rd State of Competition Report**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of the Competition and Markets Authority's third State of Competition Report.

#### **8.28 Northern Ireland Consumer Price Index**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an update on the Office for National Statistics work on developing a Northern Ireland Consumer Price Index.

#### **8.29 Carers NI Event**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an invitation to a Carers NI event on Thursday 7 November 2024 in the Tullyglass Hotel - looking at poverty amongst unpaid carers in Northern Ireland.

#### **8.30 Caleb's Cause NI.**

The Committee considered a request from Alma White to present to the Economy Committee about Calebs Cause NI.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to invite Alma White to brief the Committee on Caleb's Cause NI.

### **8.31 NI Aerospace, Defence, Security and Space Industries**

The Committee considered a request to brief the Committee Chairperson on the NI aerospace, defence, security and space industries.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the Chairperson could undertake this informal meeting, subject to his availability.

### **8.32 Support for Families with Multiple Births**

**Noted:** The Committee noted commentary in respect of the need for additional support for families with multiple births.

### **8.33 Firmus Energy**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Press Release from Firmus Energy in respect of its sale of its gas supply business, Firmus Energy (Supply) Ltd. to the Yuno Group.

### **8.34 RHA**

**Noted:** The Committee noted copies of emails between the Renewable Heat Association and the NI Audit Office.

### **8.35 Individuals with Disabilities at Employment Tribunals**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence relating to the treatment of individuals with disabilities at employment tribunals from a concerned individual.

## **9. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its Forward Work Programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed its forward work programme as amended and including a briefing from Ulster University in January 2025 on the Strategic Policy Unit and student numbers etc.

## **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 13 November 2024 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting moved into closed session at 11:57am.

## **12. Committee Strategic Plan**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to defer consideration of its strategic plan.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:58am.

**Phillip Brett MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**13 November 2024**