



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 20 November 2024

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Stormont

Present: Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Present via Video-Conferencing:

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

Apologies: Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

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 10:03am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Committee considered tabled correspondence in respect of Departmental guidance relating to the calibration and replacement of non-domestic RHI meters.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an explanation as to why calibration and meter replacement was no longer required and clarity in respect of those participants that had already incurred related costs.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 13 November 2024.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Department for the Economy / Tourism NI / Tourism Ireland – Draft Tourism Vision and draft 10-year Tourism Action Plan – Oral and written evidence

The officials joined the meeting at 10:04am.

Pádraig Delargy joined the meeting at 10:05am.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- Michelle Scott, Director, Entrepreneurship and Partnership Division, DfE;
- Stewart Matthews, Head of Tourism Policy, Strategy and Legislation, DfE;
- John McGrillen, Chief Executive Officer, Tourism NI; and
- Alice Mansergh, Chief Executive Officer, Tourism Ireland

Jonathan Buckley joined the meeting at 10:11am.

Key issues discussed included: visitor data; the final version of the action plan (which is to be produced before the end of 2024); peace tourism; events tourism; business tourism; air connectivity and transport infrastructure; the Visit Derry Outline Business Case (OBC); social media funding, strategy and marketing for Tourism Ireland / Tourism NI; return on marketing investment and linking promotion to the supply of tourism experiences; supporting experience development with small grants; Electronic Travel Authorisation issues; stewardship plans and clustering; support for tourism skills; collaboration with TEO and Invest NI; and support for alternative accommodation providers.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 11:45am.

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

- details of the peace tourism group membership and ToRs;
- an update on the Visit Derry OBC;
- information on Tourism Ireland and Tourism NI social media spending, strategy, targets and return on investment;
- information on hotel occupancy in Belfast and the sub-regions

- further details on the pilot stewardship plans;
- tourism segmentation data including the spending profile of visitors;
- a breakdown of tourism spending by NI sub-region;
- clarity as to the Departmental measures which are to support tourism skill development; and
- details of policy to support alternative accommodation providers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a further briefing in respect of the final version of the Tourism Vision and 10 Year Tourism Action Plan.

7. Department for the Economy – Digital Markets Competition and Consumers Act – oral and written evidence session

The officials joined the meeting at 11:47am.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- Colin Jack, Director of the Business and Employment Regulation Division, DfE
- Dennis Cunningham, Head of Consumer Affairs Branch, DfE; and
- Damien Doherty, Chief Inspector of Trading Standards, DfE.

Key issues discussed included: the content and passage of the DMCC Act; extensive new enforcement powers for the Competition and Markets Authority; and the timing of the briefing and the passage of the Act.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 11:58am.

Noted: The Committee noted that initial Departmental correspondence in respect of Legislative Consent had been received in August 2024 after the Act had previously received Royal Assent.

8. Workplus – Access to Apprenticeships - oral and written evidence

The witnesses joined the meeting at 11:59am.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- Richard Kirk, Founder and CEO, Workplus;
- Shauna Herron, Managing Director, Environmental Techniques;
- Patrick English, Head of Careers, Wellington College; and
- Oscar Daly, Apprentice, Instil.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 12:16pm.

Sinead McLaughlin nominated Jonathan Buckley to act as Chairperson.

David Honeyford seconded the nomination.

Jonathan Buckley assumed the chairpersonship at 12:17pm.

Key issues discussed included: barriers to accessing apprenticeships including: a non-standard application process, costs to training organisations and employers and the need for support to develop new apprenticeship offers; the options for a UCAS style employer/apprenticeship matching model and/or a new local authority model based on the Local Enterprise Partnerships to support apprenticeship development.

Sinead McLaughlin left the meeting at 12:54pm.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 1:00pm.

9. Proposed Rule – SL1 - FE Student Support

The Committee considered a proposed statutory rule entitled: The Further Education (Student Support) (Eligibility) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department to make the proposed rule.

10. Correspondence

10.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

10.2 North South Ministerial Council Meeting

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Minister's statement on the North South Ministerial Council Meeting held in Armagh on 23 October 2024.

10.3 3-Year Budget Information - update

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental update on the 3-year budget information gathering exercise which provided further information on revised DfE capital bids.

10.4 Finance Minister's Statements

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Minister of Finance's statement on 2024-25 October Monitoring and her statement on UKG funding for 2025-26.

10.5 14-19 Implementation Framework

Noted: The Committee noted a response sent to the Committee for Education from DE on the 14-19 Implementation Framework.

10.6 NI Executive Brussels Report

Noted: The Committee noted the Office of the NI Executive Brussels report for July to September 2024.

10.7 Retail NI

The Committee considered Retail NI's request to brief the Committee on its concerns in respect of employers National Insurance contributions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to include Retail NI along with Hospitality Ulster and the Federation of Small Businesses in a joint evidence session on 4 December 2024.

10.8 Youth Assembly

Noted: The Committee noted a Youth Assembly response to the draft PfG.

10.9 The Economics of Abuse 2024

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of a research paper - The Economics of Abuse 2024.

10.10 Previous witness

Noted: The Committee noted a thank you letter from a previous witness on employment tribunals.

10.11 Invitation - BBC

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to an informal reception in the Long Gallery on Tuesday 19 November 2024 marking 110 years of BBC services in Northern Ireland.

Philip Brett re-joined the meeting and reassumed the chairpersonship at 1:05pm.

10.12 RHI

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from a small business owner regarding the non-domestic RHI scheme – setting out his opposition to the closure of the scheme.

Jonathan Buckley recorded his concern in respect of the Department's guidance relating to meter calibration and replacement issues for the non-domestic RHI scheme.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to:

- defer a briefing on the Social Enterprise Action Plan;
- undertake a visit to the geothermal demonstration unit;
- reduce its agenda for 8 January 2025;
- undertake an informal joint evidence-taking event with the Committee for Finance on support for businesses; and
- reschedule its AI brief.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek Departmental briefings on the Westminster Employment Rights Bill; the Data (Use and Access) Bill; the Great British Energy Bill; and the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to undertake visits to the Game of Thrones visitor centre; the energy hub in Dungannon; and Enniskillen FE college.

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

12. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

13. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 27 November 2024 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:14pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

27 November 2024