



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 27 November 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 Philip McGuigan MLA

Present via Video-Conferencing:

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Apologies:

- Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
- Mr David Honeyford 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

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Interconnection

The Chairperson advised that according to AQW 18143/22-27, Ofgem had reassessed an earlier decision and approved the LirIC electricity interconnector between Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Utility Regulator is now understood to be considering the LirIC licence application, with a decision expected by the end of this year. The Chairperson indicated that the project will likely have significant implications for security of supply etc..

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Utility Regulator seeking clarity as to the criteria that it will apply in respect of its decision on the LirIC interconnector application.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 20 November 2024.

5. Matters Arising

Further to the evidence session on 20 November 2024 on apprenticeships, the Chairperson reminded Members of suggestions in respect of: a standardised apprenticeship application process; a UCAS style employer/apprenticeship matching service; and an enhanced role for the new Local Economic Partnerships in supporting apprenticeship development.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that further to the evidence session from Workplus, it would write to the Department seeking its commentary on Workplus' suggestions in respect of apprenticeships including whether apprenticeship uptake and development targets had been set.

6. Delegated Legislation- SR 197 Tribunal Rules of Procedure

Departmental officials joined the meeting at 10:03am.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- Gareth Dillon- Head of Employment Policy and Legislation, DfE; and
- Don Henderson- Employment Policy and Legislation, DfE

Key issues discussed included: technical amendments to tribunal rules of procedure.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 10:13am.

The Committee agreed the following motion:

Agreed: "That the Committee for the Economy has considered SR 2024/197 The Industrial Tribunals and Fair Employment Tribunal (Constitution and Rules of Procedure) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024, and subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, has no objection to the rule"

7. Utility Regulator (Preparation for Decarbonisation) Bill - Departmental evidence session

Departmental officials joined the meeting at 10:14am.

This session was reported by Hansard.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- Anne-Maire McConn, Director of Energy Strategy, DfE; and
- Paul Skillen, Head of Energy Legislation, DfE.

Key issues discussed included: responses to the Bill consultation; the timing of the introduction of the Bill; the Utility Regulator's statutory independence; the costs associated with revisions to the Utility Regulator's role; the interim nature of the Bill and other anticipated energy related legislation; the request for related Utility Regulator advice from other departments; the need for legal clarity in respect of longer term consumer interests; the mid-term review of the Energy Strategy and the development of new Departmental policy in respect of transitioning domestic consumers to low carbon energy sources; the impact on rural energy consumers of transition; and the issues relating to the regulation of the home heating oil market.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 10:48am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Utility Regulator seeking its views on the Bill and whether the Bill should limit its advice-giving to the Department for the Economy only.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking the timetable for the introduction of energy related legislation in respect of: the role of the Utility Regulator; offshore renewable energy support schemes; offshore renewable energy safety and decommissioning regulations; petroleum licensing and fracking; and other energy matters relating to hydrogen and demand response technology.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to alter the order of agenda items.

8. Correspondence

8.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

Gary Middleton declared an interest as his wife is member of the City of Derry Airport (CoDA) board.

8.2 CoDA Business Cases

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response indicating that the City of Derry Airport and the PSO (CoDA to Heathrow route) business cases are in development. The Committee also noted that legal advice had been sought in respect of the transfer of functions relating to aviation policy moving from DfI to DfE.

8.3 Regulation and Metrology Bill.

The Committee considered a letter from the Minister outlining his concerns around the Westminster Product Regulation and Metrology Bill and indicating that he did not at this time wish to support legislative consent for the Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a Departmental briefing on the devolved implications of the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill.

8.4 Car Insurance Issues

Noted: The Committee noted a Ministerial response indicating that the Minister of Finance is considering the benefit of extending legislation in respect of the remit of the Financial Conduct Authority to include the regulation of claim management companies in NI.

8.5 NICS e-Vehicle Fleet

The Committee noted a Departmental response indicating that it maintains a limited fleet of vehicles and one is a hybrid.

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

8.6 Call for Evidence: Biofuels and Home Heating

The Committee considered a Departmental Call for Evidence on using biofuels to transition away from fossil fuels for heating.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a Departmental briefing on the feedback to the call for evidence when it was available.

8.7 Budget Information Gathering Exercise

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of a Department of Finance response on the timeliness of departmental responses to the budget information gathering exercise.

8.8 Inquiry into Financial Services

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Terms of Reference for the Committee for Finance inquiry into financial services.

8.9 Open University response to the draft PfG

The Committee considered the Open University response to the draft PfG consultation including a call for: a statutory right to training leave and lifelong learning; and maintenance grants and loans for HE part-time learners. The

Committee also noted that OU had referred to a UK business barometer which identified skills shortages in NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the OU and seek sight of the NI data in the UK business barometer.

8.10 Ulster University Capital Spending by Campus

Noted: The Committee noted information from Ulster University on the last 5 years of capital spending by campus.

8.11 Invitation - Belfast Harbour

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation from the Belfast Harbour.

8.12 Invitation - Annual Human Rights Statement

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to attend the launch of the Annual Human Rights Statement 2024.

8.13 UK Finance Events Programme

Noted: The Committee noted information on the events programme for 2025 from UK Finance.

8.14 Litigant in Person

The Committee noted forwarded correspondence from a Litigant in Person in respect of an employment/industrial tribunal.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the concerned individual indicating that the Committee's role is based on policy and that it consequently could take no part in individual proceedings.

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its Forward Work Programme.

Noted: The Committee noted its first meeting after Christmas recess will be on 8 January 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reschedule its trip to Foyle including a visit to CoDA from 22 January 2025 to 8 January 2025.

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

Proceedings were suspended at 10:58am.

Proceedings resumed at 11:08am.

10. Post-19 SEN provision - Caleb's Cause NI

The witness joined the meeting at 11:09am.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- Alma White, Campaigner, Caleb's Cause NI

Key issues discussed included: transition plans for young people with SEN including individual mental capacity profiles and tailored plans; the need for post school pathways cross-departmental co-operation and Health Trust consistency of approach to post-19 SEN; the features of the EHC system in England; parental consultation exhaustion; the benefits of an aspirational curriculum; and the relevant inquiry report of the Committee for Employment and Learning (CEL).

The Chairperson thanked the witness for her evidence.

The witness left the meeting at 11:49am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write the Minister: seeking a timeframe for the development of post-19 SEN provision and whether legislation will be required; asking for examples of collaboration in the delivery of SEN support and the lessons learned both in this and other jurisdictions; and seeking an explanation as to the failure to implement the recommendations of the CEL inquiry report.

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 4 December 2024 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

13. Committee Strategic Plan

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

The meeting was adjourned at 11:49am.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

4 December 2024