



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 8 January 2024**

**Meeting Location: Room MU302 Magee Campus, UU**

**Present:**

Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

**Apologies:**

Mr Jonathan Buckley 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 10:18am.

## **1. Apologies**

Apologies were as indicated above.

## **2. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

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

### **3.1 2025-26 Budget**

The Chairperson reminded the Committee that the Executive had issued the draft 2025-26 budget for consultation before Christmas. He also advised that the Department had recently provided its January Monitoring Round submission for budget year 2024-25.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking a briefing, when the January Monitoring Round is complete, on how the 2024-25 Departmental budget will finish and in respect of its 2025-26 draft budget allocation.

## **4. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 11 December 2024.

## 5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

## 6. Magee Expansion Taskforce - Final Report and Action Plan – evidence session

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 10:19am:

- Stephen Kelly, Chairperson of the Magee Expansion Taskforce
- Linda McGuinness, Magee Expansion, Department for the Economy

Diana Armstrong joined the meeting at 10:29am.

Key issues discussed included: the Magee expansion report; the governance of the expansion programme including independent oversight, the development of a programme business case, the role of the Taskforce and the production of annual update reports; the 50+ additional courses to be offered at Magee by 2023; the need to widen student participation, recruit specialist tutors and support transferable skill development; student accommodation pressures and lessons learned from private developments in Belfast including the management of HMOs; engagement with local businesses and schools; cross border co-operation and the reconciliation dividend; and the impact on other campuses and on university provision in NI and RoI.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 11:47am.

Diana Armstrong left the meeting at 11:49am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity in respect of: the governance arrangements for the Magee expansion programme and the role of the Taskforce; the tracking and reporting of capital investment progress; and the impact of the draft budget on relevant capital plans.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Taskforce recording its thanks for the report and action plan and seeking a follow-up briefing in respect of the first annual monitoring report.

## **7. Ulster University – Strategic Policy Unit / Magee Expansion – evidence session**

The following witness joined the meeting at 11:49am:

- Professor Paul Bartholomew, Vice-Chancellor, Ulster University

Diana Armstrong rejoined the meeting at 11:49am.

Key issues discussed included: the Vice Chancellor's discretion in respect of appointments to the Strategic Policy Unit; the Magee expansion report; the development of the Coleraine campus and the UU People Place and Partnership Strategy document; student numbers and the application of dynamic entry requirements; MaSN restrictions; the marketing of UU to the GB market; engagement with schools in NI; collaboration with Further Education; recruitment of specialist tutors; the need for a sustainable funding model for Higher Education in NI; UU's budget; the role of international/unregulated students and the impact of changes to immigration rules; student loans and fees.

Philip McGuigan left the meeting at 12:00noon.

The Chairperson thanked the witness for his evidence.

The witness left the meeting at 1:17pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to UU seeking: clarity on the impact of Employers' National Insurance increases on the University's finances; information on the numbers of RoI/Donegal students attending UU campuses currently and following Magee expansion; a breakdown of the current and projected student numbers by course; and further information on the impact of changes to immigration rules on the level of applications to UU and the likely impact on its finances.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the relevant UKG immigration minister setting out its concerns in respect of the changes to immigration rules and how this might affect applications to and the financial viability of universities in NI.

## **8. Great British Energy Bill - legislative consent- Departmental evidence session**

The following officials joined the meeting at 1:19pm:

- Anne-Maire McConn, Head of Energy Strategy and Corporate Services, DfE

- Paul Skillen, Energy Strategy and Corporate Services, DfE

Key issues discussed included: the Great British Energy Bill; the need for Executive consent prior to the laying of the relevant motion; the amendment to the Bill requiring the consent of the Department in respect of the strategic statement for the new energy company; and the development of renewable energy resources in NI.

Pádraig Delargy left the meeting at 1:37pm.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 1:39pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department urgently seeking clarity in respect of: how the renewable energy development of the NI coastal seabed by the new energy company will impact on devolved responsibilities; the degree of agency that the Executive will enjoy in respect of the allocation of renewable energy development funding by the new energy company; and how key energy players in NI will be consulted by the new energy company as it implements its strategy.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed that the Clerk should seek guidance from the Business Office in respect of the laying of the relevant memorandum and the production of a Committee report in order to inform the related plenary debate.

## **9. Statutory Rule – Public Interest Disclosure**

Pádraig Delargy rejoined the meeting at 1:42pm.

The Committee considered the statutory rule SR 2024/216 The Public Interest Disclosure (Prescribed Persons) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 and agreed the following motion.

**Agreed:** That the Committee for the Economy has considered SR 2024/216 The Public Interest Disclosure (Prescribed Persons) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 and subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, had no objection to the rule.

## **10. Correspondence**

### **10.1 Index**

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

### **10.2 Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response on the Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan; and the consultations on the Strategic Environmental Assessment and the Habitats Regulation Assessment and related delays as the Department is working thru “spatial issues” with the Ministry of Defence.

### **10.3 Utility Regulator (Preparation for Decarbonisation) Bill**

The Committee considered a Departmental response on the Utility Regulator (Preparation for Decarbonisation) Bill.

### **10.4 Utility Regulator Vires**

The Committee considered correspondence from the Utility Regulator reiterating its position that it requires its vires to be widened in order to support decarbonisation and that the current Utility Regulator (Preparation for Decarbonisation) Bill is insufficient in this regard.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department and seek clarity as to why the relevant Bill is to be brought forward even though it is unlikely to meet the requirements of the Utility Regulator

### **10.5 Interconnection Policy**

The Committee considered further information from the Utility Regulator on the transmission licence for the new NI-Scotland electricity interconnector which is understood to not include revenue generating provision pending development by the Department of a policy on interconnection.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the development of an interconnection policy.

### **10.6 Standard Connection Charge**

The Committee considered correspondence from the Utility Regulator on changes to the Standard Connection Charge (SCC) to the electricity grid.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department again seeking an update on the development of the grid connection charging framework.

### **10.7 Biomethane Strategy**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental update on the development of a biomethane strategy.

### **10.8 Post-19 SEN provision project**

The Committee considered a Ministerial response on the Post-19 SEN provision project.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to Caleb's Cause NI.

### **10.9 Apprenticeship Application Processes**

The Committee considered a Departmental response on Workplus' suggestions in respect of a single apprenticeship application process and a NI-wide register.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the response to Workplus.

### **10.10 Small and Micro Business Impact Assessments**

The Committee considered a Departmental response indicating that Small and Micro Business Impact Assessments (SAMBIT) are part of the regulatory impact assessment process.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Federation of Small Businesses NI, Hospitality Ulster and Retail NI.

### **10.11 AMME Sectoral Plan**

The Committee considered a Departmental response indicating that the views of the Aerospace, Defence, Security and Space industries (ADS) group were indeed sought as part of the development of the AMME sectoral action plan and that further engagement with the group will be sought in the development of the clustering policy.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the ADS group.

### **10.12 CCEA Regulation**

The Committee considered Ministerial correspondence advising of a review commissioned and supported by DE/DfE in respect of the structure and autonomy of CCEA Regulation which is responsible for the accreditation of general and vocational qualifications offered in Northern Ireland, as well as the recognition and compliance of awarding organisations in Northern Ireland.



**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department and seek sight of the relevant project plan including timescales and milestones

### **10.13 Financial Inclusion Committee**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of a Ministerial letter to the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, endorsing the Consumer Council's request for membership of the new Financial Inclusion Committee.

### **10.14 Departmental Research bulletins**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Departmental research bulletins relating to: economic inactivity; skills and qualifications; ICT skills; the NI brain drain; and tourism on the island of Ireland.

### **10.15 Tourism Ireland 2023 Annual Report**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of the Tourism Ireland 2023 annual report.

### **10.16 CITB Annual Report and Accounts for 2022-23**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of the Construction Industry Training Board annual report and accounts for 2022-23.

### **10.17 DfE 2025-26 Budget Increment Impact Assessments**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of the revised 9% and 12% 2025-26 budget increment impact assessments from the Department.

### **10.18 2025-26 Budget Increment Impact Assessments**

The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Finance (CfF) seeking sight of the DfE 2025-26 budget increment impact assessments.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward relevant DfE papers to CfF.

### **10.19 January Monitoring / Spring Supplementary Estimates**

**Noted:** The Committee considered a copy of commissioning letters from DoF to departments in respect of January Monitoring and the spring supplementary estimates. The Committee noted also a copy of the Department's January Monitoring submission and that it had already agreed to seek a Departmental briefing in this regard and relating to the 2025-26 budget allocation.

### **10.20 Chancellor's Statement**

The Committee noted a Department of Finance response in respect of the impact of the Chancellor's statement.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Federation of Small Businesses NI, Hospitality Ulster and Retail NI

### **10.21 Cost of Doing Business Research**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Finance including the Terms of Reference of the UU EPC research into the cost of doing business in NI including Employers' National Insurance contributions and increases to the national minimum and living wages, as well as other contributing factors such as insurance, property and energy costs, alongside the disparities in tax, such as VAT, between the UK and Republic of Ireland.

### **10.22 December DfE Capital Investment Report**

The Committee considered the December DfE capital investment report from the delivery tracking system.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write again to the Department seeking an update on the anticipated new public procurement note and how this will include the delivery tracking system with a view to better monitoring City and Growth Deal spending.

### **10.23 EU regulation - CLP Chemicals**

The Committee considered the report from the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee on EU regulation 24/2865 on classification, labelling and packaging of chemicals.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to DfE and seek an update on the development of related policy by the UK Government.

### **10.24 EU regulation - defective product liability**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a report from the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee on EU regulation 24/2853 on defective product liability.

### **10.25 Public Petition**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a letter from the Speaker regarding a public petition opposing the Mourne gondola project which is part of the Belfast Region City and Growth Deal.

### **10.26 Consultation on a proposed Private Member's Bill**

The Committee noted a consultation on a proposed Private Member's Bill, provisionally entitled the Regional Jobs, Skills and Investment Bill.

### **10.27 Funding of City of Derry Airport**

The Committee noted information from the Competitions and Markets Authority in respect of a referral to the Subsidy Advice Unit regarding the proposed allocation of resource funding to City of Derry Airport (CoDA) by Derry City and Strabane District Council.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek clarity from CoDA during its visit to CoDA on 8 January 2025.

### **10.28 Open University - Business Barometer**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a response from the Open University providing further information on its business barometer.

### **10.29 Public Sector Productivity**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a response from UU Economic Policy Centre indicating that it had not undertaken any research on public sector productivity and the support of the Department would be required to undertake such research.

### **10.30 QUB Response - Draft PfG**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a QUB response in respect of the draft PfG.

### **10.31 UCAS - Level 4 and 5 Qualifications Report**

The Committee considered correspondence from UCAS in respect of its Level 4 and 5 Qualifications Report. The report appeared to suggest that NI had a much lower number of 18 year olds applying to undertake Level 4 and Level 5 qualifications through UCAS providers compared to Scotland and Wales and England and that only a small number of such courses was available in NI.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department and seek clarity on UCAS' assertions.

### **10.32 Carers NI 60th Anniversary Event**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an invitation to the Carers NI 60th Anniversary Event in the Long Gallery at Parliament Buildings on Wednesday 22 January 2025.

### **10.33 Ofcom NI - FY25/26 Plan of Work**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from Ofcom NI setting out its FY25/26 Plan of Work and including an invitation to a consultation event on 23 January 2025 in the Long Gallery.

### **10.34 SONI Grid Alerts**

**Noted:** The Committee noted information from SONI on a number of electricity grid alerts.

### **10.35 Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance**

The Committee considered a request from the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance to brief on its views in regard to the Tourism Vision and 10-year Action Plan.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to arrange a briefing session with the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance.

**Noted:** The Committee noted that the Department had laid the 2023-24 annual report and accounts for 5 of the 6 FE colleges and these were to be included in meeting packs for 15 January 2025.

## **11. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed its forward work programme as amended including briefings from: Free the Night; DkIT and NITA.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to again write to the Committee for Education seeking an early date for a joint concurrent session on workstreams shared by both relevant departments.

## **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 15 January 2024 at 10:00am in room 30 Parliament Buildings Stormont.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:54pm.

**Phillip Brett MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**15 January 2025**