



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 9 October 2024

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Stormont

Present: Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Present via Video-Conferencing:

Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Pádraig Delargy 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

There were no apologies.

2. Declarations of Interest

Philip McGuigan and Phillip Brett declared interests as co-sponsors of a previous Centre for Advanced Sustainable Energy event.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson welcomed Diana Armstrong MLA to the Committee and recorded his thanks to Colin Crawford MLA for his service to the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Colin Crawford MLA thanking him for his service to the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed, further to previous correspondence, to write to Translink seeking sight of the business case for the extension of the night-time bus service on a pilot basis.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 2 October 2024.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Professor David Rooney – oral and written evidence session – Net Zero policy issues

The witness joined the meeting at 10:03am.

Kate Nicholl joined the meeting at 10:04am.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- Professor David Rooney, Centre for Advanced Sustainable Energy.

Key issues discussed included: the impact of climate change; barriers to developing renewables; the need to improve consumer confidence and trust in the renewable sector; the anticipated Utility Regulator Bill; consumer pricing and community benefits; the potential impact of energy restrictions on productivity; carbon offsetting and the role of agriculture; the need for innovative renewable energy financial supports including development banks; the experience in other jurisdictions; the possible impact on net zero projects of the enhanced investment zone; planning issues; the cost of not intervening; and interconnection issues.

The Chairperson thanked the witness for his evidence.

The witness left the meeting at 11:20am.

7. Department for the Economy - oral and written evidence session – 2024-25 Business Plan, draft PfG and Transformation

Officials joined the meeting at 11:21am.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- Ian Snowden, Permanent Secretary, Department for the Economy; and
- Shane Murphy, Head of Management Services and Regulation Group, Department for the Economy

Key issues discussed included: the Sub-Regional Economic Plan and the planned impact within and without the Belfast metropolitan area; imminent discussions with Further Education colleges on the new model for FE delivery; the reported pausing of the enhanced investment zone by the UKG; Departmental support for Magee expansion; the Higher Education funding review including MaSN elements, RoI

students and post-graduate expansion by QUB; climate change, the inter-departmental energy project board, the achievement of Energy Strategy targets and the role of the Investment Strategy in delivering on domestic energy efficiency retrofitting; co-development with TEO of the International Relations strategy; the MoU on all island co-operation; alignment of RoI tourism brands Ireland's Ancient East with Armagh and Down and the re-evaluation of Ireland's Hidden Heartlands brand and its inclusion of the Fermanagh lakelands; PfG economic benchmarking with nations like Estonia; Invest NI redeployment in support of the Sub-Regional Economic Plan; post-19 SEN measures; and the funding and governance of City of Derry Airport.

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

Pádraig Delargy left the meeting at 12:12pm

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 12:42pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the City of Derry Airport business case and further explanation in respect of the related £3m allocation reported under October Monitoring.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the enhanced investment zone submission which is being prepared by DfE.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking information on HE student leavers from NI and their rate of return; and information on the current and planned support for international HE students wishing to study in NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the Utility Regulator Bill.

8. Forum for Better Housing NI – oral and written evidence - Housing Decarbonisation

The witnesses joined the meeting at 12:44pm.

The Committee received oral evidence from:

- David Little, Chairperson, Forum for Better Homes NI;
- Anita Conway, Director of Development, Radius Housing;
- Ciarán Fox, Director, Royal Society of Ulster Architects; and
- Gavin McGuire, NI Director, Federation of Master Builders.

Key issues discussed included: domestic energy efficiency retrofitting and the need for a multi-year plan with a single department in the lead; the need for verification of a retrofit measures programme; strategies for the use of disused buildings; the “fabric first” approach; the need for planning changes to give effect to building regulation improvement and issues with planning backlogs and pre-planned developments; the need to focus on social home energy efficiency improvement; the need for a presumption of EPC A standards for all new domestic builds; the importance of an energy one-stop shop and accreditation scheme to provide consumer confidence; and the need for a supply chain of energy efficiency skills and approved installers.

David Honeyford declared an interest in that he is a director of a construction company.

Kate Nicholl left the meeting at 1:03pm.

Sinéad McLaughlin left the meeting at 1:04pm.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 1:17pm and Gary Middleton assumed the chairpersonship of the meeting.

Phillip Brett returned and resumed the chairpersonship at 1:20pm.

Philip McGuigan left the meeting at 1:30pm.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 1:33pm.

9. Correspondence

9.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

9.2 Consultation on Smart Electricity Meters Design Plan

Noted: The Committee noted the consultation papers, pending a Departmental briefing on the feedback to the consultation.

9.3 Consultation on Low Carbon Heating Support in Residential Buildings

Noted: The Committee noted the consultation papers, pending a Departmental briefing on the feedback to the consultation.

9.4 Invest NI Business Strategy 2024-27

Noted: The Committee noted information on the Invest NI business strategy for 2024-27, pending an Invest NI briefing on 16 October 2024.

9.5 Student Numbers at UU Magee

Noted: The Committee noted a response to Committee queries on student numbers at UU Magee and that an interim snap-shot of enrolment can be produced by mid-October and will be provided to the Committee.

9.6 Fort George Capital Project

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence advising on the progress of the Fort George capital project and that the business case may be approved by DoF by the end of this calendar year.

9.7 Skills Strategy

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Skills Strategy 2nd annual monitoring report.

9.8 DfE Investing Activity Report

Noted: The Committee noted the DfE Investing Activity Report for September 2024.

9.9 NI Civil Service Vacancy Levels

The Committee considered information on NI Civil Service vacancy levels by department.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity as to the impact of staff vacancies on service delivery.

9.10 Shared Prosperity Plan

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance in respect of the Shared Prosperity Fund.

9.11 Budget Sustainability Plan

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the budget sustainability plan.

9.12 Self-Employed People in Northern Ireland

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for Communities to DfE requesting information on the number of self-employed people in Northern Ireland, not currently enrolled in a pension scheme.

9.13 SL1 The Payment and Electronic Money Institution Insolvency Rules

Noted: The Committee noted an SL1: The Payment and Electronic Money Institution Insolvency Rules (Northern Ireland) 2024 which had been drafted by DfE but laid by DoJ and considered by the Committee for Justice.

9.14 Northern Ireland Mushroom Growers Association

The Committee considered correspondence from the Northern Ireland Mushroom Growers Association (NIMGA) on the UK Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) review on the Seasonal Workers Visa.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department, seeking its commentary on this issue.

9.15 Financial Provisions Bill.

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the C&AG indicating that the Department has been in contact with NIAO in respect of the content of the Financial Provisions Bill.

9.16 Youth Assembly Newsletter

Noted: The Committee noted the Youth Assembly Newsletter for September 2024.

9.17 Employment Bill

Noted: The Committee noted the NI Chamber of Commerce and Industry response to the Employment Bill consultation.

9.18 Invitation to visit Boots

Deferred: The Committee deferred consideration of an invitation to visit Boots in Donegall Place.

9.19 Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission E-Newsletter

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission e-newsletter for September 2024.

9.20 23rd National Bioenergy Conference

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to attend the Irish Bioenergy Association (IrBEA) 23rd National Bioenergy Conference on Thursday 10 October 2024 at the Royal Marine Hotel, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the Department and the NI Chamber of Commerce and Industry to brief on matters relating to the Employment Bill consultation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to meet informally with the Ulster University UNESCO group from the University of Mosul in Iraq, after its meeting scheduled for 23 October 2024.

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

11. Any Other Business

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite officials from Ulster University to discuss issues in respect of recent appointments to the Strategic Policy Unit.

Mr Honeyford recorded his concern in respect of recent appointments to Intertrade UK.

There was no other business.

12. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 16 October 2024 at 9:30am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:37pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

16 October 2024