



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 12th March 2025**

**Meeting Location: The Eikon Centre, Maze Long Kesh, Lisburn**

- Present:**
- Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)
  - Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
  - Ms Diana Armstrong MLA
  - Mr David Honeyford MLA
  - Ms Emma Sheerin MLA
- Apologies:**
- Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA
  - Mr Pádraig Delargy 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)

Stuart Gilmour (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in public session at 10:35am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content for the meeting to be recorded and broadcast by media outlets.

### **1. Apologies**

Apologies were as indicated above.

### **2. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

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

#### **3.1 DfE 2023-24s Annual Report and Accounts**

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Department's annual report and accounts for 2023-24 had been laid recently. The Chairperson advised that the C&AG had disclaimed her audit of the accounts owing to pervasive and material issues.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that as the Public Accounts Committee currently had primacy, it would keep a watching brief on this issue.

#### **3.2 Mobile Data Coverage**

The Chairperson reminded Members that during the joint concurrent meeting of 5 March 2025, Fibrus Networks Ltd referred to the absence of a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Openreach. Reference had also been made to limited mobile

data coverage in Northern Ireland which prevented the use of alternative technologies in remote locations.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to Ofcom in respect of the mobile data coverage and SLA issues.

#### **4. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 5 March 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the joint concurrent committee meeting of 5 March 2025.

#### **5. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

#### **6. Department for the Economy – Storm Éowyn Compensation – oral evidence session**

The following officials joined the meeting at 10:37am:

- Richard Rodgers, Head of Energy Group, DfE.
- Anne-Maire McConn, Director of Energy Strategy & Corporate Services, DfE.
- Richard Hume, Head of Business & Industrial Processes, DfE.

Key issues discussed included: the current regulatory structures for electricity; the remit of the Utility Regulator; cost of capital issues; the current Guaranteed Service Standards; the critical care register; compensation statements and the delays in the provision of clarification; lesson learned; the relationship between the Department and the Utility Regulator; NIE Networks Ltd investment and regulated profits; the

need for enhanced network resilience and the reported re-profiling of RP7 costs; and insurance considerations

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 11:26am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister:

- seeking clarification in respect of her response to AQW 21369/22-27 and the reported agreement in principle to make compensation payments to NIE Networks Ltd's customers;
- urging the development of enhanced vulnerable customer support measures;
- suggesting the revision of Guaranteed Service Standards so as to include affordable severe weather payments for customers who lose essential electricity supplies;
- seeking information on the severe weather mitigations for the electricity network that are to be brought forward as part of the review and re-profiling of RP7 costs; and
- seeking further information on the lessons learned from the Storm Éowyn response.

## **7. Maze Long Kesh Development Corporation – oral evidence session**

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 11:27am:

- Dr Bryan Gregory, Interim Chief Executive, MLK Development Corporation;  
and
- Neil McIvor, Director of Development, MLK Development Corporation.

Key issues discussed included: the Corporation's role and the limitations to its remit; the importance of connectivity and infrastructure to exploiting the MLK site's potential; the requirement for political resolution in order to progress the regeneration of the MLK site; the need to de-risk development opportunities by updating key reports; the possible inclusion of the MLK site in the forthcoming Executive

Investment Strategy; the role of TEO; and expenditure pressures associated with maintaining the site.

Phillip Brett recorded his party's view that the Maze prison site could never be used as a shrine to terrorism.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 12:11pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to TEO seeking an update and timeline for the development of the MLK site and suggesting that agreed development plans for the site be included in the Investment Strategy.

## **8. Delegated Legislation – Student Support**

David Honeyford declared an interest as his daughter has a student loan.

Emma Sheerin declared an interest as she has a student loan.

The Chairperson welcomed the provision of tuition fee loans for Graduate Entry Medical School students and expressed support for the extension of such loans to other post-graduate students in other campuses and universities in Northern Ireland, which is understood to be under consideration as part of the Department's wider review of Higher Education.

**Agreed:** The Committee considered the statutory rule entitled: SR 2025/32 The Education (Student Support, etc.) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and agreed the following motion:

“That the Committee for the Economy has considered the statutory rule: SR 2025/32 The Education (Student Support, etc.) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, has no objection to the rule”

## **9. Correspondence**

## 9.1 Index

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

## 9.2 Long Duration Storage and Interconnection Policy

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence in respect of the long duration storage and interconnection policy which will apparently not be developed until 2026.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Utility Regulator for comment at the scheduled evidence session on 26 March 2025.

## 9.3 Social Enterprise

**Noted:** The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of the Social Enterprise Action Group and research on the social enterprise sector.

## 9.4 DfE Annual Report and Accounts for 2023-24

The Committee noted a copy of the DfE Annual Report and Accounts for 2023-24.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that as the Public Accounts Committee currently had primacy, it would keep a watching brief on this issue.

## 9.5 Joint Budget Event

The Committee considered a copy of the draft report from the Committee for Finance on the joint budget event at NICVA on 29 January 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the report as drafted and agreed the following motion for debate in plenary.

*That the Assembly notes Committees' Report on the impact of the Chancellor's Autumn Budget Statement on critical sectors, including business, community and voluntary and social enterprises; further*

*notes that while the increases to the National Living and Minimum Wages are to be welcomed, their sudden nature, combining with the rise in Employers' National Insurance Contributions and wider cost of living increases, creates an environment in which many businesses, social enterprises and community and voluntary organisations may, at best, struggle and, at worst, cease operations; and calls on the Executive to develop a co-ordinated response to this crisis led by the Finance and Economy Ministers'*

### **9.6 5-year Budget Sustainability Plans**

**Noted:** The Committee noted information from the Committee for Finance that departmental 5-year budget sustainability plans are expected to appear in the autumn and are to be used as a planning aid for departments.

### **9.7 Cost of Doing Business**

**Noted:** The Committee noted information on the Cost of Doing Business in NI research commissioned by DoF.

### **9.8 Procurement - Small Construction Works**

**Noted:** The Committee noted information on a procurement challenge relating to small construction works.

### **9.9 Employment Tribunals – Co-Design**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a response from the President of the Employment Tribunals in respect of the co-design of support for litigants in person.

### **9.10 Employment Tribunals - Statement**

**Noted:** The Committee noted restricted correspondence seeking a statement from the Committee on employment tribunals.

### **9.11 Ulster University – Rol Students**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from Ulster University in respect of Rol students and their selection of UU courses.

### **9.12 QUB - Request to brief**

The Committee considered correspondence from Queen’s University of Belfast offering to brief the Committee on the current Higher Education landscape and funding model in NI.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule the evidence session and visit to QUB.

### **9.13 NITA Reports**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance.

### **9.14 NIC-ICTU Response**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the NIC-ICTU response to the ‘Good Jobs’ Employment Rights Bill Consultation.

### **9.15 Construction Employers Federation - Budget 2025/26**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the Construction Employers Federation submission to the consultation on the draft Northern Ireland Executive Budget 2025/26.



### **9.16 Post-19 SEN**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of a letter to the Minister for the Economy requesting further details on Post 19 SEN responsibility, funding and financial expenditure.

### **9.17 NI Chamber's Momentum Conference**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an invitation to the NI Chamber of Commerce Momentum Conference, taking place on Thursday 3 April 2025 at Galgorm Resort.

## **10. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule a joint concurrent meeting with CAERA on 28 May 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to reschedule the proposed visit to the Granville Eco Park and instead visit Enniskillen on 4 June 2025 to include engagement with Tourism NI and visits to Balcas and Encirc.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed its forward work programme, as amended.

## **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 19 March 2025 at 10:00am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings Stormont.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:20pm.

**Phillip Brett MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**19 March 2025**