



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 15 January 2025

Meeting Location: Room 30 Parliament Buildings Stormont

Present:

Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Present via Video Conferencing:

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin 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 10:06am.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Informal Meetings

The Chairperson advised that, as previously agreed, the Committee had undertaken informal meetings with: the US Chamber of Commerce on 12 December 2024; and with City of Derry Airport on 8 January 2025 and that short notes summarising the relevant informal proceedings had been issued.

3.2 Credit Union Reform

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee had previously written to the Department seeking clarity on its plans for the reform of credit unions in Northern Ireland. However since then, in AQWs, the Department had advised that related legislation is to be brought forward in this mandate.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission Assembly Research to provide a briefing on the state of the credit unions in Northern Ireland; the need for reform; and the experience in other relevant jurisdictions.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the tabled revised minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 8 January 2025.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Department for the Economy - Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill Consultation – Evidence Session

Proceedings were recorded by Hansard.

The following Departmental officials joined the meeting at 10:08am:

- Colin Jack - Director of Business and Employment Regulation Division;
- Kellie Sprott - Employment Conditions and Collective Rights;
- Gareth Dillon - EU Exit and Work-Life Balance; and
- Dearbhla Redmond - Employment Relations Policy and Legislation

Key issues discussed included: the interim report on the Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill consultation responses; the need for clarity on the final proposals which are to be included in: the anticipated Bill, delegated legislation and guidance; the timing/timescale for the consultation; the level and nature of responses and the need for further sectoral engagement; the understanding of the possible proposals and their unintended consequences in the business and public sectors; the role of the Labour Relations Agency engagement forum; further planned Departmental engagement with stakeholders; further research on the cost benefit of carers leave; the gender pay gap; holiday pay; notice of industrial action; Working Time record-keeping; trade union representation; day 1 rights; agency worker protections; zero hours contracts and the gig economy; banded hours and the impact on Universal Credit; fire and rehire; right to payslips and particulars of employment; right to disconnect; and practices and legislation in other jurisdictions.

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:

- commenting that a Committee response was difficult to provide given the absence of detail in respect of the proposals which are to be legislated upon;
- commenting on the absence of useful impact assessments particularly in respect of Theme C Voice and Representation;
- commenting on the need for clarity in respect of that which was consulted upon and that for which a call for evidence was made;
- indicating surprise at the limited engagement with key stakeholders including in the agricultural sector and Local Economic Partnerships;
- calling for further consultation and engagement with a view to informing stakeholders and thus limiting what may prove to be a lengthy Committee Stage;
- seeking a further update on the Department's analysis of responses including information on respondent groups e.g. hospitality businesses, SMEs, carers and ALBs and the percentages of respondents in favour or opposed to the proposals;
- seeking clarity as to the Minister's proposals for legislation including that which is to be the subject of: primary legislation, delegated legislation and guidance;
- seeking an update on the development by NISRA of data and good jobs indicative measures which reflect the other aspects of the Carnegie Framework and which include the gender pay gap;
- seeking sight of the UU EPC research into the cost benefit analysis of carers paid leave;
- seeking information on the relevant horizon-scanning undertaken by the Department in respect of related developments in other jurisdictions including information on Departmental exchanges with HMRC, the Department for Business and Trade and the Department for Work and Pensions in respect of the impact of the Bill on tax, businesses and access to Universal Credit; and
- the ToRs and membership for the Labour Relations Agency engagement forum.

Proceedings were suspended at 11:53am

Proceedings resumed at 11:58am

7. NI Chamber of Commerce - Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill

Consultation – Evidence Session

Proceedings were recorded by Hansard

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 11:58am:

- Stuart Anderson, Director of Public Affairs, NI Chamber of Commerce; and
- Mark Huddleston, Managing Director, jhe Solutions and Chairperson of the NI Chamber Workforce Committee

Key issues discussed included: the need for an overarching economic vision and industrial/manufacturing strategy; holiday pay reform; zero hours contracts and access to Universal Credit; supporting employers to engage with employees; leadership and management development; recruitment challenges; other Good Jobs measures including childcare and job design etc. which were absent from the consultation; enforcement of legislation and the management of unintended consequences including the impact on the Labour Relations Agency and employment tribunals; the impact on smaller businesses; the need for measures to address economic inactivity and disengagement in the labour force; the sectoral impact of the Bill; and productivity issues.

Kate Nicholl left the meeting at 12:45pm

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 1:11pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department:

- seeking an update as to how the employment legislation will impact on DfE's work with other departments to develop childcare supports and the Childcare Strategy;
- seeking clarity as to whether legislation will seek to impose a 2-year backstop on holiday pay claims; and
- seeking clarity as to the impact of banded hours measures on access to Universal Credit.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the NI Chamber of Commerce, inviting it to brief the Committee again when clarity on proposals is provided by the Department and seeking sight of the Kumar report on employment and benefits.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission Assembly Research to provide a briefing on employment law developments at Westminster, Scotland (the Fair Work Commission) and the RoI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a briefing from the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre on leadership and management in NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC-ICTU) to provide a briefing on the consultation but to pause any further briefings from other stakeholders until the Minister's proposals were clarified.

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 1:15pm

8. Correspondence

8.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

8.2 Mineral Prospecting Licences

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence in respect of seven mineral prospecting licences.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer consideration pending the closure of the consultation in April 2025.

8.3 Impact of the EU General Product Safety Regulations.

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response providing further information on the impact of the EU General Product Safety Regulations.

8.4 2023-24 Annual Reports for FE Colleges

The Committee considered the 2023-24 annual reports for FE colleges: Belfast Metropolitan; North West; South Eastern; Southern; and South Western.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and suggest that as part of the revised reporting arrangements for FE colleges they be

required to report on enrolment, retention, achievement and success in the same format in all of their annual reports.

8.5 NIC-ICTU

Noted: The Committee considered a request from NIC-ICTU to brief on the Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill.

8.6 CMA - 2025-26 Annual Plan

Noted: The Committee noted a consultation document from the Competition and Markets Authority on its 2025-26 Annual Plan.

8.7 Renewable Heat Association

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence sent to Energy Branch, DfE from the Renewable Heat Association.

8.8 Tourism Vision and Action Plan

The Committee considered a tabled copy of the final version of the Tourism Vision and Action Plan

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a further briefing on the Tourism Vision and Action Plan from the Tourism Partnership Board.

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to undertake visits and meetings at: Maze Long Kesh; Games of Thrones and the Deluxe Group; Studio Ulster and Spirit Aerospace; and the Granville Eco park at Dungannon.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to schedule a visit to the Balmoral Show.

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

10. Any Other Business

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Translink seeking information on the impact of the Nightmovers service and seeking also an update on the business case for extension of the service.

11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 22 January 2025 at 10:00am in room 30 Parliament Buildings Stormont.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:21pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

22 January 2025