



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 19 February 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 Jonathan Buckley MLA
- Mr David Honeyford MLA
- Ms Kate Nicholl MLA
- Ms Emma Sheerin MLA

**Present via video conferencing:**

- Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
- Ms Sinéad McLaughlin 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 10:01am.

## **1. Apologies**

There were no apologies.

## **2. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

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

### **3.1 Shore Road Skills Centre**

The Chairperson thanked Members for their support in lobbying for the unpausing of the City and Growth Deals and advised that as a consequence, the City and Growth Deal funding of £2.2m had been confirmed for the Skills Centre on the Shore Road in North Belfast.

### **3.2 Labour Statistics**

The Chairperson reminded Members that NISRA had published labour statistics for 2024 including improvements in employment and earnings and reductions in redundancies.

### **3.3 Informal Meeting**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed it was content for the Chairperson to meet informally with the Utility Regulator on 4 March 2025.

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

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 12 February 2025.

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

There were no matters arising.

#### **6. Department for the Economy– Legislative Consent - Westminster Employment Rights Bill - oral evidence session**

This session was recorded by Hansard

The following officials joined the meeting at 10:02am:

- Colin Jack, Director of Employment and Regulation Division, DfE;
- Kellie Sprott, Employment Conditions and Collective Rights, DfE; and
- Paul Lyons, Employment Conditions and Collective Rights, DfE

Key issues discussed included: the evolving anticipated role of the Fair Work Agency including Minimum Wage, gangmasters and Statutory Sick Pay enforcement and the interaction with the Labour Relations Agency; the role of the Workplace Relations Inspectorate in RoI; the anticipated amendment to the Bill which will require the Secretary of State to obtain NI departmental consent; the timescale for the passage of the Westminster Bill; employment rights awareness in NI; and the need for further employment legislation in the next mandate.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 10:38am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to Committee for Communities indicating general support for the relevant aspects of the Westminster Employment Rights Bill in respect of the Fair Work Agency, subject to sight of the relevant amendment ensuring consent of the NI

departments is sought prior to the enlargement of the role of the Fair Work Agency.

## **7. Social Enterprise Co-Design Group - Social Enterprise Action Plan – oral evidence session**

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 10:38am:

- Dave Linton, Founder and CEO, Madlug – Co-Chairperson Co-Design Group;
- Maeve Monaghan, CEO, NOW Group - Co-Chairperson Co-Design Group; and
- Colin Jess, CEO, Social Enterprise NI.

Key issues discussed included: profit with purpose; measuring outcomes; supporting social enterprises with a working capital fund and the possible use of Financial Transaction Capital; the possible role of credit unions; new relationships with Invest NI, InterTrade Ireland, district councils, Central Procurement Delivery and the Strategic Investment Board; changes to public procurement social value scoring; awareness and social enterprise champions; the cross-departmental Social Enterprise Policy Group; the impact of the loss of the Shared Prosperity Fund; a new survey and statistics on social enterprise and social value in NI; leadership development; growth and scaling of social enterprises; social and private partnerships; international best practice; and commissioning opportunities and frameworks.

Pádraig Delargy left the meeting at 11:15am

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 11:54am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Social Enterprise Co-Design Group expressing its support for the Social Enterprise Action Plan and seeking an update on the social enterprise champion training programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking:

- an update on the QUB / Middlesex University survey and report on social enterprise in NI;
- an update on the status and Terms of Reference for the Social Enterprise Policy Group;
- information on measures it is to undertake to provide alternative funding channels for social enterprises incorporating the revision of relevant Departmental frameworks including in respect of the delivery of skills, so as to allow social enterprises access to public procurement.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to commission Assembly Research to produce a paper on social enterprise best practice, in particular in respect of Scotland, Netherlands and the USA.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister in order to highlight the reported under use of Financial Transaction Capital (FTC) by the Department (and other departments) and suggesting consideration be given to redirecting FTC to support social enterprises.

## **8. Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance - 10 Year Tourism Action Plan and Vision – oral evidence session**

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 11:56am:

- Dr Joanne Stuart OBE, CEO NITA; and
- Nuala Saul, CEO Brack Tours and President of the Inbound Tourism Operators Association Ireland (ITOA).

Key issues discussed included: rising costs for tourism providers; promotion of NI tourism by Tourism NI; impact of the Electronic Travel Authorisation; the need for electric vehicle and public transport infrastructure to support sustainable tourism; the challenges and opportunities of peace tourism; sectoral skills challenge; regional dispersal issues; business visitors and adapting the tourism offering.

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 12:43pm.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 12:57pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to NITA seeking:

- feedback on its recent ETA webinar;
- sight of the VAT hospitality report for Rol; and
- the itinerary of the Brack Tours peace tourism offering.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to TEO seeking an update on the development of the International Relations Strategy.

Diana Armstrong left the meeting at 12:58pm

## **9. Delegated Legislation - Insolvency Practitioners**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the statutory rule entitled: SR 19/2025 Insolvency Practitioners (Recognised Professional Bodies) (Revocation of Recognition) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025.

## **10. Delegated Legislation - FE Student Support**

The Committee again deferred consideration of the statutory rule entitled: SR 2025/20 The Further Education (Student Support) (Eligibility) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

## **11. Correspondence**

### **11.1 Index**

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

### **11.2 Local Economic Partnerships - ToRs**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response on the Terms of Reference for the Local Economic Partnerships.

### **11.3 Local Economic Partnerships – Funding**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response on the funding of Local Economic Partnerships.

### **11.4 Single Electricity Market**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response advising that the review of the Single Electricity Market is at the planning stage.

### **11.5 Interconnection Research**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Departmental correspondence advising that its commissioned interconnection research will be available in April 2025.

### **11.6 Strategic Environmental Assessment**

**Noted:** The Committee noted, pending a pre-consultation Departmental briefing, a Departmental briefing note on the proposed consultation on the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Environmental Report and Report to Inform Appropriate Assessment (RIAA) for Offshore Renewable Energy.

### **11.7 Artificial Intelligence**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response providing some information on the Artificial Intelligence Collaboration Centre (AICC) and the UKG's AI Opportunity Action Plan.

### **11.8 Public Service Apprenticeship Research**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response including the CCEA Regulation Public Service Apprenticeship research paper.

### **11.9 Regional Property Programme**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response on the Regional Property Programme.

### **11.10 Invest NI support**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response on Invest NI investment targeted within and beyond the Belfast Metropolitan Area.

### **11.11 Product Regulation and Metrology Bill**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response on the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill giving some information on the consultation in NI and the timeline.

### **11.12 Co-Design for Litigants in Person**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response indicating that it is for the President of the Industrial Tribunal to co-design appropriate arrangements for litigants in person.

### **11.13 Higher Education Innovation Fund**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Departmental correspondence on the review of the Higher Education Innovation Fund.

### **11.14 NICS Sick Absence**

**Noted:** The Committee noted forwarded correspondence from the Committee for Finance regarding sick absence levels within the NICS.



### **11.15 Open Government NI**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of an Open Government NI briefing paper on departmental responses to Fol requests.

### **11.16 Artificial Intelligence**

The Committee noted a paper on AI in public services in Estonia prepared by Dr Vincent Charles QUB.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the paper to the Committee for Finance.

### **11.17 Shared Rural Network Programme**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a response from Ofcom in respect of the Shared Rural Network programme and mobile coverage in NI.

### **11.18 Infant Formula Costs.**

**Noted:** The Committee noted information on the CMA report on infant formula costs.

### **11.19 UCAS Applications**

**Noted:** The Committee noted UCAS data on applications to universities for the 2025 cycle.

### **11.20 My MS: My Symptoms Event**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an invitation to attend the My MS: My Symptoms event on Thursday 29 May in Room 115, Parliament Buildings.

### **11.21 Road Alignment Works**

**Noted:** The Committee noted concerns in respect of delays relating to road alignment works on the Comber Road.

### **11.22 Employment Tribunals**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence requesting an update on the Committee's actions and investigations into the policy issues in relation to Employment Tribunals.

### **11.23 Employment Tribunals**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual requesting a progress update on actions taken or planned in relation to Employment Tribunals.

## **12. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to meet informally with HoC Select Committee on Business and Trade (on 11-12 March) and the HoC International Agreements Committee (on 7 May 2025).

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

## **13. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

#### **14. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting**

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 26 February 2025 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings Stormont.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:01pm.

**Phillip Brett MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**26 February 2025**