



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 19th March 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 Sinéad McLaughlin MLA
- Ms Emma Sheerin MLA

Present via video conferencing:

- Mr Pádraig Delargy 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)

Michael Scholes (Research Officer) – item 7 only

The meeting commenced in public session at 10:03am.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Declarations of Interest

Sinéad McLaughlin, Diana Armstrong, Pádraig Delargy, Kate Nicholl and Phillip Brett declared interests as they are all members of different credit unions.

3. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's Business.

4. Draft Minutes

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

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Department for the Economy – Smart Electricity Metering Consultation Feedback – oral evidence session

The following Departmental officials joined the meeting at 10:05am:

- Sarah Brady – Director, Energy Operations, DfE;
- Maeve Holly – Smart Meters Policy Team, DfE; and
- Patrick Grimes – Smart Meters Policy Team, DfE.

Jonathan Buckley joined the meeting at 10:10am

Emma Sheerin joined the meeting at 10:15am

Key issues discussed included: cost benefits of smart electricity metering, payback periods and energy usage information; likely procurement and roll-out processes including opt out options; data issues and consumer confidence; misinformation; the proposed Oversight Group including the Consumer Council NI and the Utility Regulator; the role of NIE Networks Ltd; consumer choice and access to benefits of the technology; protection for vulnerable customers and related codes of practice; remote disconnection, prepayment and consumer rights; connectivity issues; groups that cannot avail of Time of Use tariffs etc.; and the skills needed to support the smart meter roll-out.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 10:46am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department:

- welcoming the anticipated provision of benefits to customers afforded by the new technology and welcoming also an opt out approach based on voluntary uptake of smart meters by consumers;
- indicating that access to benefits should be provided to: vulnerable groups, geographically remote customers with connectivity issues and customers who may be unable to exploit Time of Use tariffs;
- expressing support for the application of appropriate data protection measures;

- seeking assurance that robust rules of engagement and protections will be developed by the Oversight Group in order to provide vulnerable customers with protections from remote disconnection or involuntary changes to their terms and conditions;
- seeking information on opt out figures for the GB smart meter roll-out;
- noting the cost associated with individual smart meter installation (in the KPMG report) and seeking information on the marginal costs (comparing smart meters with conventional meter installation); and
- seeking a cost breakdown of the £421m cost indicated in the KPMG report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to SONI in respect of the “Shaping our Electricity Future” consultation and seeking an explanation of the KPMG reference to studies performed by SONI which suggest that increasing demand in areas of high renewable energy, such as the North-West of Northern Ireland, minimises network constraints, limits the needs for network reinforcements and increases the effective output of renewable energy generation.

7. Assembly Research briefing - Credit Union Reform

The RalSe briefing commenced at 10:52am.

The Chairperson thanked RalSe for the briefing.

The RalSe briefing concluded at 11:10am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the timeline for credit union reform.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission RalSe to provide further information on:

- credit union membership levels in GB, ROI compared to Northern Ireland;

- the levels of Barnett consequential associated with UKG credit union support in GB; and
- information on the impact of credit unions on tackling financial exclusion.

8. Department for the Economy - Insolvency and Director Disqualification Consultation Feedback – oral evidence session

The following Departmental officials joined the meeting at 11:11am:

- Richard Monds, Director of Insolvency, DfE; and
- Jack Reid, Insolvency Team, DfE.

Key issues discussed included: the feedback to the consultation; and Law Society NI concerns in respect of the statements of affairs for bankrupt individuals.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their briefing.

The officials left the meeting at 11:21am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department indicating its general support for the provisions consulted upon; seeking further clarity on the issues raised by the Law Society NI; and seeking the Department's views on the need for accelerated passage.

9. Delegated Legislation – Employment Rights

The Committee considered the proposed statutory rule entitled: The Employment Rights (Increase of Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department to make the rule.

10. Correspondence

10.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

10.2 Enhanced Investment Zone

The Committee noted a Departmental update on the Enhanced Investment Zone, the focus of which is to now to include the Advanced Manufacturing (AMME) sector and the freeports initiative.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department welcoming clarity on the Enhanced Investment Zone and seeking oral and written evidence on: the revised objectives and their relationship with City and Growth Deals; measures of success; and the way forward.

10.3 Social Enterprises FTC

The Committee considered a Ministerial response on the provision of support including Financial Transactions Capital to social enterprises.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the social enterprise loan scheme.

10.4 Childcare Market Research

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response indicating that childcare market research is to be complete by the end of March 2025.

10.5 Employment Research

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of employment research including the QUB research into gender gap employment.

10.6 Stranmillis Review

Noted: The Committee noted an update on the review of public bodies including the report of the ICS review into Stranmillis University College.

10.7 NI Screen Review

Noted: The Committee noted the report of the ICS review of NI Screen.

10.8 North West Development Fund

The Committee considered the TEO response on the North West Development Fund indicating that TEO is engaging with RoI Government in respect of future funding.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister noting with concern the absence of matched funding and seeking clarity on why matching funding had not been provided.

10.9 Grants - Procurement Act

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Communities Committee sent to DfE on contracts/grants and the Procurement Act.

10.10 ERDF Replacement Funding

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Communities Committee sent to DfE in respect of ERDF replacement funding.

10.11 Budget Information

The Committee considered a commissioning note forwarded by the Committee for Finance indicating that DoF has asked all departments to provide final budget information before 13 March 2025 including equality impact assessments.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department again seeking the impact assessments for the 2025-26 budget allocations.

10.12 NI Fiscal Council Report

Noted: The Committee noted a link to the NI Fiscal Council report in respect of the NI Executive's 2025-26 Draft Budget.

10.13 Joint Concurrent with CAERA

Noted: The Committee noted confirmation that CAERA is content to meet concurrently on 28 May 2025 on telecommunications issues.

10.14 Disclaimed Accounts

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) indicating that it is to retain primacy in respect of the DfE disclaimed annual report and accounts 2023-24.

Pádraig Delargy and David Honeyford declared an interest in that they are Members of PAC.

10.15 PAC - NIAO reports

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from PAC in respect of the current status of NIAO reports being scrutinised by PAC.

10.16 Product Regulation and Metrology Bill

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of a letter from the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to Lord Leong, Department for Business and Trade in respect of the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill and the interaction with Windsor Framework.

10.17 EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of a letter from the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to the Secretary of State for NI in respect of ongoing transitional introduction of the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and its potential implications for Northern Ireland.

10.18 Renewable NI – request to brief

The Committee considered a request to brief from Renewable NI in respect of the consequences of delay to the delivery of the North-South Interconnector and regarding distributed generation support for 1-5MW renewables.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an initial brief from the Department on the renewable electricity support scheme.

10.19 Restricted Correspondence

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider restricted correspondence in closed session.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission RalSe to provide an overview paper and briefing on renewable energy.

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

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 26 March 2025 at 10:00am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings Stormont.

Proceedings continued in closed session at 11:33am.

10.19 Restricted Correspondence

The Committee considered a copy of restricted correspondence in respect of a NIPSO report into a complaint about the actions of DfE and an individual Insolvency Practitioner.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content to not consider the relevant NIPSO investigation report, in line with SO46(8).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the correspondent indicating that pending outworking of the NIPSO investigation and the related Departmental actions it would take no action in respect of this matter.

14. Written briefing - Disability Support Service performance

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department:

- expressing disappointment by the absence of clarity in respect of Disability Support Service performance;
- seeking an explanation as to why previous historic data could not be used to report against previous KPIs;

- suggesting KPIs going forward should include student and training provider satisfaction;
- indicating that student outcomes and onward progression should at the very least be recorded and should ideally be used to assess the effectiveness of the Disability Support Service and Skills for Life and Work programme;
- seeking an explanation of the relationship between training providers and DSS providers and expressing concern at the absence of independent oversight of the performance of DSS providers; and
- seeking clarity on the disaggregation of funding for Skills for Life and Work and DSS provision.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 11:44am.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

26 March 2025