



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 22 January 2025

Meeting Location: Room 30 Parliament Buildings Stormont

Present:

- Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)
- Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Mr David Honeyford MLA
- Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA
- Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Present via Video Conferencing:

- Ms Diana Armstrong MLA
- Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA
- Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
- Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

In Attendance:

- Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
- Anthea Matthews (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Michael Doran (Clerical Officer)

Stuart Gilmore (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in public session at 10:02am.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Investment at Belfast Harbour

The Chairperson welcomed recent press reports relating to a substantial investment at Belfast harbour designed to support the economic impact of cruise visitors to Northern Ireland and the development of wind turbine technology.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange a visit to the Belfast harbour estate.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 15 January 2025.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Department for the Economy - Post Graduate Awards Scheme – Evidence Session

The following Departmental officials joined the meeting at 10:03am.

- Mark Lee – Director of Higher Education, Skills and Education Group, DfE
- Dr June Faccini – Head of Higher Education Research and Knowledge Exchange Branch, DfE

Padraig Delargy joined the meeting at 10:07am

Key issues discussed included: the limited consultation feedback; limited tracking of PhD student outcomes and destinations; support for students in order to provide additional flexibility and encourage wider participation; the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF); the stipend review by UK Research and Innovation; consideration of postgraduate research loans options; increasing collaboration with industry and the public sector for PhD research; increased focus on outcomes; supporting priority areas of research; £8.30 return on investment for each £1 invested in the PGA Scheme; and the need to develop better evaluation of the impact of the Scheme.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 10:44am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department:

- highlighting its fundamental concerns in respect of the limited responses to the consultation and the consequent information gap in respect of the effectiveness of the PGA Scheme;
- indicating its support for the better alignment of PhD research topics with the needs of industry, the improved specification of outputs and those changes to the terms & conditions for the Scheme which are designed to enhance participation by those with caring responsibilities etc.;
- indicating its support for an increase in the HEIF; and
- seeking a breakdown of the respondents to the consultation setting out the extent to which priority economic areas were engaged including the green economy.

The Committee agreed to revise the order of its agenda.

7. Delegated Legislation - Companies Disqualification Order Regulations

The Committee considered the proposed rule entitled the Draft Companies (Disqualification Orders) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland).

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

8. Correspondence

8.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

Jonathan Buckley, Pdraig Delargy, Kate Nichol and Phillip Brett declared interests in that they are in receipt of a student loan

8.2 Student Loans – T&Cs etc.

The Committee considered information from the Department on the impact of the variation in student loan interest rates; the terms and conditions information provided to prospective students; and on student loan calculators.

8.3 Student Loans Company – Over Repayment

The Committee considered correspondence from the Student Loans Company in respect of over-repayment issues.

8.4 NUS-USI

The Committee considered correspondence from NUS-USI reporting that over 3 thousand Northern Ireland graduates overpaid their loans in 2020-21, with an average overpayment of £471.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the Student Loans Company and the Department to provide oral evidence on the terms & conditions information provided to prospective students and the measures they will take to reduce erroneous over-payments.

8.5 CLP Regulations

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response clarifying in respect of the relevant Explanatory Memorandum and the likelihood of incorporation of new hazard classes into the GB Classification, Labelling and Packaging (of chemicals) Regulations.

8.6 KPIs - Disability Support Service

The Committee considered a Departmental response declining to provide information on Disability Support Service provider performance compared to relevant KPIs and seeking a closed session briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to accept a closed session briefing from the Department on Disability Support Service provider performance.

8.7 General Product Safety Regulations

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Consumer Council on the General Product Safety regulations indicating that it has no remit in relation to product safety and had not received any consumer enquiries on this issue.

8.8 29th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules

Noted: The Committee noted the 29th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

8.9 SONI Winter Outlook

Noted: The Committee noted the revision of the SONI Winter Outlook for 2024-2025 following storm Darragh. Members noted that the risk of disruption to supply was reported as low

8.10 QUB Research to Reality Event

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to a drop-in Research to Reality Event sponsored by QUB in the Long Gallery in Parliament Buildings on Tuesday 21 January 2025

8.11 Employment Tribunals

The Committee considered restricted correspondence from a concerned individual regarding employment tribunals and also including an Fol to the Department and a complaint to the President of the employment tribunals.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and the President of the employment tribunals seeking clarification on support provided to litigants in person and asking how the co-design of revised supports for personal litigants is to be undertaken.

Proceedings were suspended at 10:57am

Proceedings resumed at 11:03am

9. North West Strategic Growth Partnership and the Northern and Western Regional Assembly - Regional Balance – Evidence Session

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 11:03am

- John McLaughlin - Chief Executive Donegal County Council, North West Strategic Growth Partnership;

- Stephen Gillespie - Director of Business and Culture, Derry City and Strabane District Council, North West Strategic Growth Partnership;
- Garry Martin, Director of Economic Development, Emergency Services and Information Systems, Donegal County Council, North West Strategic Growth Partnership;
- Denis Kelly, Director - Northern and Western Regional Assembly; and
- John Daly, Policy Research Officer/Economist - Northern and Western Regional Assembly

Padraig Delargy declared an interest as he is a member of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership

Key issues discussed included: infrastructure, skills and disposable income deficits in the North West; the Derry City and Strabane District Council City and Growth Deal and Magee expansion; the Local Economic Partnership funding model; economic development in the North West including the rights of cross-border workers and the need for bilateral agreements on tax and hybrid working as well as in respect of cross-border data-sharing; tourism developments and the impact of the ETA; educational collaboration; cost benefit analysis for infrastructural investment; supporting foreign direct investment; the North West Development Fund; renewable energy infrastructure; OECD comparisons; planning and tax issues; the smart cities initiative; and the challenge of AI.

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 12:41pm

Philip McGuigan left the meeting at 12:42pm

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 12:44pm.

Dianna Armstrong left the meeting at 12:44pm

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for the Economy urging him to raise cross-border issues with the governments of the RoI and UK in order to highlight the need for bilateral agreements on hybrid working and tax issues as well as in respect of data-sharing across borders in order to promote economic development in the North West.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to TEO seeking an update on the funding of the North West Development Fund.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the following to provide oral and written evidence: Transmission Investment Ltd; the Social Enterprise co-design group; the ADS group; and the Deluxe Group.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to undertake a visit to Belfast Stories.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a briefing on the recent productivity report by Dr Jordan, QUB.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Causeway Chamber of Commerce in respect of regional balance issues including investment challenges with a view to undertaking a visit and meeting with key stakeholders.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking the Local Economic Partnership funding formula and details of the membership of the LEP boards.

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to meet informally with the Bavarian State Parliament Committee for Science and Arts on 11 February 2025.

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed a draft media release in respect of the Finance and Economy Committee joint event on 29 January 2025.

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 29 January 2025 at 10:00am in NICVA, North Belfast.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:50pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

29 January 2025