



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 30th April 2025

Meeting Location: Northern Regional College, Coleraine.

Present:

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

Apologies:

- 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 10:10am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Informal Meeting

The Chairperson advised Members that he had met informally with the Minister on Monday 28 April 2025 prior to her oral statement on the anticipated Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill and that related Departmental papers had been tabled and that a summary note of the informal meeting had been circulated.

Members recorded concerns in respect of the Department's consultation with business stakeholders in respect of the Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information and assurance on its current and planned consultations with business stakeholders.

Padraig Delargy joined the meeting at 10:14am.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 9 April 2025.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. UU EPC – Management and Leadership in NI SMEs – oral evidence session

The following witness joined the meeting at 10:14am:

- Dr Karen Bonner, Principal Economist, Ulster University Economic Policy Centre.

Emma Sheerin joined the meeting at 10:19am.

Key issues discussed included: the establishment of a portal for SME management and leadership diagnostic support and training including a mentor directory; the role of Invest NI in supporting SMEs in respect of management and leadership training; barriers to access to upskilling for managers; SME scepticism; tax breaks; course accreditation; management challenges associated with remote and hybrid working; embedding management and entrepreneurship skills in the education curriculum; and course responsiveness to business need.

Pádraig Delargy declared an interest in that he had undertaken a Skill Up course on productivity.

The Chairperson thanked the witness for their evidence.

The witness left the meeting at 11:01am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarification as to how it is to implement the recommendations of the UU EPC research.

7. Causeway Chamber of Commerce – Regional Economic Growth - oral evidence session

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 11:01am:

- Karen Yates, CEO, Causeway Chamber of Commerce;
- Steve Fraser, MD, City of Derry Airport and Vice President Causeway Chamber of Commerce;
- Professor Liam Maguire, Ulster University; and
- Jonathan Hanna, General Manager, Terex.

Key issues discussed included: regional balance; the impact of the City and Growth Deal and Towns Fund in addressing the economic issues facing the area; Local Economic Partnerships; Invest NI support; infrastructure issues; tourism; the Open and its enduring legacy for the area; offshore renewable energy; the impact of the Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill in respect of zero hours contracts etc.; and the need for a Regional Living Wage.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 12:14pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance seeking an update on the development of the Causeway Coast and Glens City and Growth Deal.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department indicating its concerns at the absence of engagement by the Department with key local stakeholders in respect of the development of off-shore renewables in the area and encouraging it to address this promptly.

8. Correspondence

8.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

8.2 NSMC Meeting

Noted: The Committee noted notice of an oral Ministerial statement on 6 May 2025 in respect of the North South Ministerial Council meeting of 16 April in trade and business development sectoral format.

8.3 North West Development Fund

Noted: The Committee a noted Departmental response in respect of TEO's responsibility relating to the North West Development Fund.

8.4 Utility Regulator Decarbonisation Bill Consultation

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence including a summary of the responses to the consultation on the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill.

8.5 Credit Union Reform

The Committee considered correspondence relating to the Department's consultation on the Credit Union (Modernisation and Reform) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a Departmental briefing on the outcome of the consultation.

8.6 Social Enterprise Training

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence including an update on Social Enterprise Champions training.

8.7 Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill

Noted: The Committee noted notice of a Ministerial statement on 28 April 2025 on the way forward for the Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill.

8.8 Bereavement Leave

The Committee considered correspondence from Marie Curie in respect of the inclusion of provisions relating to unpaid / paid bereavement leave in respect of the Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to give further consideration to this matter when the relevant Bill is introduced.

8.9 Smart Metering

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence in respect of the design plan for the roll-out of smart metering.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write again to the Department seeking a breakdown of the smart metering roll-out costs.

8.10 Opening Doors Strategy

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence including an SIB review of the 2018-2022 Opening Doors NI Screen Strategy and the business case evaluation for the 2022-26 Opening Doors NI Screen Strategy.

8.11 Stranmillis University College (SUC) Review

The Committee considered correspondence relating to the review of SUC; the Teacher Demand model; and the development of other teaching professional pathways.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Committee for Education.

8.12 Disability Support Service KPIs

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence on Disability Support Service KPIs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to undertake a visit to a Disability Support Service provider.

8.13 Mineral Development and Petroleum Production Accounts 2023-24

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the 2023-24 Mineral Development and Petroleum Production Accounts .

8.14 Consumer Council Partnership Agreement

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Northern Ireland Consumer Council partnership agreement with the Department.

8.15 SEN Transition

The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Education in respect of educational transitions for pupils with Special Educational Needs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department.

8.16 Construction Sector Skills

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Communities to the Department for the Economy in respect of construction sector skills.

8.17 US Tariffs

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to the SoS NI in respect of the impact of US tariffs on NI.

8.18 Further Education Pay

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual in respect of FE pay.

8.19 Trade NI Event

The Committee considered an invitation to the Chairperson to attend a Trade NI event in Westminster on 21 May 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that owing to diary clashes the Chairperson would be unable to attend.

8.20 Pathways to Work Green Paper

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to attend a seminar on poverty and disability and the Pathways to Work green paper on 28 April 2025.
Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme including in respect of evidence sessions from Speakers for Schools; Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism; Fermanagh and Omagh District Council; Visit Derry; and Derry City and Strabane District Council.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Tourism Ireland should be asked to attend the scheduled evidence sessions on tourism in Fermanagh and the North West scheduled for 4 June and 25 June 2025 respectively.

- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek oral and written evidence from Foyle Port as part of its meeting on 25 June 2025.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek oral and written evidence from QUB in respect of its budget concerns and to combine this with a visit to the university prior to summer recess.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it felt unsighted and poorly informed in respect of the impact of Artificial Intelligence on the economy of Northern Ireland. The Committee therefore agreed to undertake visits, evidence sessions and as appropriate training in order to inform its understanding of this important and developing matter including evidence from the Executive's Chief Scientific and Technology Adviser.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed its forward work programme as amended.

9. Any Other Business

The Committee recorded its thanks to Anthea Matthews for her work in the Committee for the Economy.

10. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 7 May 2025 at 10:00am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 12:29pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

7 May 2025