



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 9th April 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 Pádraig Delargy MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Emma Sheerin MLA

Present by video-conferencing:

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Apologies:

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

In Attendance:

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Anthea Matthews (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Stuart Gilmour (Clerical Officer)

Clare Maguire (Assembly Engagement Team) – item 12 only

Caroline Moore (Assembly Engagement Team) – item 12 only

The meeting commenced at 10:00am in public session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to a revised order of agenda items.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

Pádraig Delargy, Emma Sheerin, Jonathan Buckley declared interests in that they are repaying student loans. David Honeyford and Diana Armstrong declared interests in that their family members are in receipt of or are repaying student loans.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 2 April 2025.

4. Matters Arising

Jonathan Buckley recorded his thanks to Members for participating in the interesting and informative visit to the Games of Thrones Studio Tour and the Deluxe Group.

Jonathan Buckley also welcomed the announcement of the Universal Studios development in Bedford and the positive impact it would likely have on the creative industry supply chain in Northern Ireland.

5. Ministerial oral evidence session

The Minister and the following Departmental officials joined the meeting at 10:02am:

- Dr Caoimhe Archibald MLA, Minister for the Economy;
- Ian Snowden, Permanent Secretary, DfE; and
- Johanna Park, Director, Budgeting and Business Partnering, DfE.

Sinéad McLaughlin joined the meeting at 10:10am.

Key issues discussed included: the 2025-26 DfE budget, the impact assessments of the related allocations and the anticipated consultation; HE student places, student displacement and the development of Magee; all island student mobility; skills places; post-19 SEN; the Employment Bill and employer engagement; disclaimed DfE accounts for 2023-24 and 2024-25 and the plan to meet the statutory deadlines for 2024-25; the anticipated renewable electricity support scheme, related primary legislation and the delayed Contracts for Difference auction; dual market access and the impact of tariffs – the tariff mitigation working group and the development of a UKG support package; Invest NI changes and morale; Local Economic Partnership progress; defence industries support including cyber and AI; the Enhanced Investment Zone; support for City of Derry Airport; infrastructure development; and the RHI closure business case.

The Chairperson thanked the Minister and her officials for their evidence.

The Minister and her officials left the meeting at 11:20am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister and her Department seeking:

- sight of the final details of the 2025-26 budget allocations and the related impact assessments;

- clarity on overall Higher Education numbers and their variation by campus;
- further information on the delayed renewable electricity Contracts for Difference auction; and
- information on the Terms of Reference and membership of the tariff mitigation working group.

6. Chairperson's Business

6.1 Game of Thrones

The Chairperson reminded Members of the Committee's informative and enjoyable visit and meeting at the Game of Thrones Studio Tour on 2 April 2025 and noted the considerable tourism potential of this world-class visitor centre; its role as a set jetting asset; its relationships with Ulster University and the development of creative skills; and the associated constraints including infrastructure and the absence of marketing support.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department urging it to adequately support the Game of Thrones Studio Tour as part of the wider Northern Ireland tourism marketing offer and to provide appropriate assistance to allow the Studio Tour to reduce some of the relevant constraints including infrastructure issues such as parking and signage.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Secretary of State for Business and Trade indicating the importance of the creative industries in Northern Ireland and their important potential role in supporting the Universal Studios development.

6.2 Kate Nicholl

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson should write to Kate Nicholl MLA congratulating her on the birth of her baby son.

7. Department for the Economy, Student Loan Company, Education Authority - Student Loans - oral evidence session

The following officials joined the meeting at 11:22am:

- Mark Lee - Director of Higher Education, Department for the Economy;
- Jonny O'Callaghan – Head of Student Finance, Department for the Economy;
- David Wallace – Deputy Chief Executive, Student Loan Company;
- Steven Darling – Director for Repayment and Customer Compliance, Student Loan Company; and
- Joanne Faloon – Deputy Student Finance Manager, Education Authority.

Key issues discussed included: equality impact of student loan constraints; repayment issues; the level of repayment in NI; communication with students; post-graduate loan support; repayment and sickness absence issues; different student loan plans in the UK; maintenance loans and grants; and support for second degrees.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 11:57am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the Department's plans to: provide for maintenance loans for graduate medical students and review the level of loan support available for second degrees.

8. Correspondence

8.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

8.2 Social Enterprise Loan Scheme.

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response indicating that it is in the very early stages of developing a Social Enterprise Loan Scheme.

8.3 Credit Union Reform

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of credit union reform. A consultation will launch at the end of April 2025, with a view to introducing a Bill to the Assembly in Spring 2026.

8.4 Interconnector Delays

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response on North South Interconnector delays.

8.5 Biomethane Evidence Response Report

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental report on the stakeholder response to the biomethane call for evidence.

8.6 Insolvency and Director Disqualification

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response on the consultation on Insolvency and Director Disqualification.

8.7 Outturn and Forecast Outturn information

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the monthly 2024-25 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn information.

8.8 Report on the draft 2025-26 Budget

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Committee for Finance report on the draft 2025-26 Budget.

8.9 Telecommunications Companies

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for Finance to DfE, seeking further information on the licencing and regulation of new telecommunications companies.

8.10 Ending Violence against Women and Girls Strategy

The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for The Executive Office requesting confirmation as to DfE's role in delivering the Ending Violence against Women and Girls Strategy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to DfE seeking the relevant information.

8.11 Speakers for Schools – Request to Brief

The Committee considered correspondence relating to work experience programmes involving Speakers for Schools and the Assembly Education Service.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider a briefing from Assembly Education Service / Speakers for Schools.

8.12 Ofcom Report

The Committee considered a response from Ofcom providing a report on mobile coverage in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the report to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

8.13 EU vehicle emission approval

The Committee noted a copy of correspondence to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in respect of the EU vehicle emission approval procedures.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee in order to determine if it is to scrutinise the relevant legislation.

8.14 Product Regulation and Metrology Bill.

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of a response to the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee in respect of the Product Regulation and Metrology Bill.

8.15 ISNI Report March 2025.

Noted: The Committee noted the ISNI Investment Activity Report for March 2025.

8.16 QUB Unions

The Committee considered correspondence from the QUB unions (NIPSA, UCU and UNITE) who have requested the opportunity to brief on proposals to cut funding to the University.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer consideration to the next Committee meeting on 30 April 2025.

8.17 Invitation from the Utility Regulator

The Committee considered an invitation from the Utility Regulator to an informal meeting with the Chairperson on 21 May 2025

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to attend, diary permitting.

8.18 Employment Tribunals

Noted: The Committee noted a restricted copy of correspondence in respect of a complaint relating to the president of the Employment Tribunals.

8.19 Smart Electricity Metering – Tabled Papers

Noted: The Committee noted a tabled response from SONI on renewable energy grid reinforcement and smart metering.

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Noted: The Committee noted tabled correspondence from the Department of Education in respect of the upcoming joint concurrent evidence session on 14 May 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed its forward work programme, as amended including a planned briefing from Invest NI in the autumn.

10. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

11. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 30 April 2025 at 10:00am in Northern Regional College, Coleraine.

Proceedings continued in closed session from 12:02pm.

12. Assembly Engagement Team - Balmoral Show

The Assembly Engagement Team briefing commenced at 12:02pm.

The Chairperson thanked the Assembly Engagement Team for their briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek to undertake a joint drop-in session with the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on 15 May 2025 at the Balmoral Show.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 12:08pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

30 April 2025