



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 29 January 2025

Meeting Location: NICVA, North Belfast.

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

Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Anthea Matthews (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Michael Doran (Clerical Officer)

Stuart Gilmour (Clerical Officer)

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

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Rural Mobile Coverage

The Chairperson advised the Committee that in Assembly Questions (AQW 20486/22-27) reference was made to the progress of the Shared Rural Network programme which is designed to address mobile “not spots” throughout the UK. The Chairperson noted that the progress of this programme is measured by Ofcom which produced an update report for Scotland recently.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Ofcom seeking an update on the Shared Rural Network programme and the elimination of mobile “not spots” in Northern Ireland.

3.2 Local Economic Partnerships - Funding

The Chairperson advised the Committee that correspondence had been received from the Minister setting out the regional balance funding formula for the Local Economic Partnerships.

The Chairperson noted with regret that this important information had not been shared with the Committee before Members had learned of it from district councils and through press releases.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking a briefing on the funding formula including an explanation of the allocations and approval process.

3.3 Invest NI – Regional Property Programme

The Chairperson advised the Committee that Invest NI had published details of its Regional Property Programme. The Chairperson noted with regret that this important information had not been shared with the Committee prior to publication.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Invest NI seeking further information in respect of the Regional Property Programme and the limited number of sites identified for investment.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 22 January 2025.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. LCM - The Great British Energy Bill – Written Evidence Session

Noted: The Committee noted a written Departmental response to Committee queries and tabled Ministerial correspondence including the Legislative Consent Memorandum (LCM) for the Westminster Great British Energy Bill.

The Committee noted that limited time had been provided to allow it to adequately scrutinise the legislation and that the written response from the Department did not provide an appropriate level of explanation for the functions of the new energy company and how these might interact with devolved competencies and the key players in the Northern Ireland energy market.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that owing to the constrained timescales it was unable to agree a position on the LCM.

Agreed: The Committee agreed its related report as drafted and ordered that the report should be published.

7. Product Regulation and Metrology Bill – legislative consent - Departmental oral evidence session

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard

The following official joined the meeting at 10:09am

- Mark McGregor - Head of Legislation, Goods Regulation and Chemicals, Department for the Economy.

Key issues discussed included: product regulation and metrology issues; non-concurrent powers and devolved competencies; timescales for the passage of the Westminster Bill; engagement with business and consumer groups; and the need for measures to address potential divergence between NI and the rest of the UK in respect of trade matters.

David Honeyford joined the meeting at 10:16am.

The Chairperson thanked the official for their evidence.

The official left the meeting at 10:31am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking: sight of the relevant consultation papers particularly in respect of consumer and business groups in NI; and clarity on the timeframes for the legislation.

Noted: The Committee noted that limited information had been provided in respect of the implementation and the consequences of the Bill and that consequently Members could not provide a firm indication of their views.

8. Artificial Intelligence – oral and written evidence

The following witness joined the meeting at 10:33am

- Dr Vincent Charles, QUB Business School.

Key issues discussed included: AI readiness and maturity in NI; the importance of regional context and “the best practice trap”; economic opportunities in NI particularly in the healthcare, agritech and manufacturing sectors; the need for and likely development of regulation; the treatment of knowledge and data by AI; the development of AI-related skills and education; public sector AI use in other jurisdictions; AI’s impact on demand in the economy; and AI’s role in meeting net zero targets.

The Chairperson thanked the witness for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 11:41am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Dr Charles seeking further information on how Estonia has used AI within its public sector and the consequent improvements in efficiency and productivity.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy indicating its support and seeking commentary on: the development of a context specific AI Action Plan for key business and public service sectors; the assessment of AI maturity and readiness in NI; and the inclusion of related measures in the Programme for Government.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance seeking its commentary on the NICS Digital Leaders’ Forum and the AI Working Group and how it is seeking to support the increased use of AI in the delivery of public services.

9. Delegated Legislation - Student Support

David Honeyford, Diana Armstrong, Sinead McLaughlin declared an interest in that their children are in receipt of student loans.

Jonathan Buckley, Pdraig Delargy, Kate Nicholl declared an interest in that they are in receipt of student loans.

The Committee considered the proposed statutory rule entitled: - The Education (Student Support, etc.) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agree to write to the Department seeking clarity on the costs of the proposed maintenance and tuition fee loan increases.

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

10. Delegated Legislation - Insolvency Practitioners

The Committee considered the proposed statutory rule entitled: – Draft Insolvency Practitioners (Recognised Professional Bodies) (Revocation of Recognition) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025.

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

11. Correspondence

11.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

11.2 Credit Union Reform

Noted: Pending a scheduled RalSe briefing, the Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of credit union reform indicating that it is the Minister's intention to launch a consultation on proposed changes before summer, with a view to introducing a Bill to the Assembly in spring 2026.

11.3 Peace Tourism / Visit Derry OBC

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response indicating that the membership of the Peace Tourism working group and ToRs have not been agreed and that in respect of the Visit Derry OBC, a review is to be undertaken before Easter.

11.4 Magee Expansion Governance

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response on Magee expansion governance indicating that: the Taskforce will act as an advocate within the Steering Group; the proposed governance arrangements, including Terms of Reference and membership for each group, will be formally established over the coming months; and the Strategic Investment Board will finalise a programme business case by April 2025.

11.5 UCAS report on Level 4/5 Qualifications

The Committee considered a Departmental response on a UCAS report on Level 4/5 qualifications. The response confirmed that the UCAS report wrongly shows NI offering a limited number of such courses with very small enrolment numbers and that this is owing to FE colleges in NI not using UCAS for admissions for Level 4 and Level 5 qualifications.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to UCAS asking it to correct its report.

11.6 CCEA Regulation

The Committee considered a Departmental response confirming that: the review of CCEA Regulation commenced in December 2024; a project plan has not yet been developed; and the review is to conclude by the end of March 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the CCEA Regulation public service apprenticeships report.

11.7 Utility Regulator Bill

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response advising that the Utility Regulator Bill will provide the Regulator with vires to support DfE only in its consideration of energy technologies and development of policies.

11.8 Interconnection Policy

The Committee considered a Departmental response on its interconnection policy indicating that research has been commissioned on the development of interconnection and storage policy in NI including analysis on the effect on the cost to local consumers, security of supply and carbon emissions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the interconnection research.

11.9 RHI settlement sought by RHA

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response on the difference between the RHI settlement sought by RHA and that which is likely to be supported by HM Treasury.

11.10 RHA- RHI

Noted: The Committee noted further correspondence from RHA in respect of RHI.

11.11 Budget 2025-26

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance on the budget 2025-26 process

11.12 NICS Sickness Levels

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Department of Finance, forwarded by the Committee for Finance on NICS Sickness levels and related HR policies.

11.13 Translink Strategic Business Case

The Committee noted a copy of the Translink Strategic Business Case for a 1-year pilot extension of its weekend Late Night Service.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Translink and DfI welcoming the business case and indicating its support for this increased service and the positive effect it will have on the night-time economy.

11.14 Work Incentives

The Committee noted a copy of a report on work incentives in the tax and benefit system indicating that the Marginal Deduction Rate (MDR) for 2.2m Universal Credit claimants in the UK is in excess of 55% with implications for economic inactivity.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the report to the Committee for Communities, for its information.

11.15 Irish Medium Education

Noted: The Committee noted the announcement of a PMB consultation which would require the Department of Education to bring forward a workforce plan for Irish Medium Education.

11.16 City of London Corporation

The Committee considered a request from the City of London Corporation to meet with the Chairperson on 11 February 2025 to discuss economic development opportunities.

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was content for the Chairperson to undertake the meeting.

11.17 Workplus & AIB Apprenticeships Week event

Noted: The Committee considered an invitation from Workplus to an AIB Apprenticeships Week event on 4 February 2025.

11.18 Employment Tribunal Complaint

The Committee considered restricted correspondence from a concerned individual regarding an employment tribunal complaint.

11.19 Employment Tribunal Complaint

The Committee considered other restricted correspondence from another concerned individual regarding the same employment tribunal complaint.

Noted: The Committee noted with concern that some of the correspondence unnecessarily impugned the integrity of officials and other public servants.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the individuals indicating that the Committee could not consider individual complaints and that the complainant could make representations to individual MLAs and could

also seek to pursue the complaint through NIPSO if and when the employment tribunal complaints procedure had been exhausted.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed a revised schedule of evidence sessions including in respect of: an LCM on the Westminster Employment Bill; productivity; student loans; regional balance with Causeway Chamber of Commerce at Northern Regional College Coleraine campus; and a joint concurrent Ministerial meeting with the Committee for Education.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek to schedule: a Ministerial briefing on the 2025-26 budget etc; and Departmental briefings on a renewable energy support scheme consultation and the policy position on the Circular Economy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to undertake a visit to Balcas Timber in Enniskillen with a Committee meeting preferably at South West College Enniskillen campus.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for Education in order to seek to schedule a further joint concurrent evidence session in the autumn with the Education and Economy Ministers attending together.

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 5 February 2025 at 10:00am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings Stormont.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:03pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

5 February 2025