



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 26th March 2025**

**Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Stormont.**

**Present:** Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Ms Emma Sheerin MLA

**Present via video conferencing:**

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

**Apologies:** Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

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 10:01am.

The Deputy Chairperson undertook the role of chairperson for this meeting of the Economy Committee.

## **1. Apologies**

Apologies were as indicated above.

## **2. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

## **3. Chairperson's Business**

### **3.1 Stranmillis University College (SUC)**

The Deputy Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee had previously noted the Innovation and Consultancy Services (ICS) review of Stranmillis University College. The Deputy Chairperson noted that the report referred to possible future reductions in the teacher demand model numbers. The report also referred to competition from on-line providers of teacher education and recommendations relating to SUC.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking clarity on the teacher demand model numbers. The Committee also agreed to write to the Department for the Economy seeking commentary on the way forward for the report's recommendations in respect of SUC.

### **3.2 NI Screen**

The Deputy Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee had previously noted the ICS review of NI Screen. The ToRs for that review excluded the assessment of strategic alignment, performance and the impact of the economic strand of NI Screen's remit as this was covered by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) evaluation of the Opening Doors Strategy 2018-2022.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the SIB review of the Opening Doors Strategy 2018-2022 and the economic appraisal for the 2022-26 Strategy.

### **3.3 Careers Action Plan**

The Deputy Chairperson reminded Members that in Assembly Questions reference was made (in AQW 23829/22-27) to the imminent publication of the Careers Action Plan.

Noted: The Committee noted that it was hoped that officials would speak to this and related matters when they provide oral evidence on careers issues etc. during the joint concurrent session scheduled for 14 May 2025.

### **3.4 Student Loans**

The Deputy Chairperson reminded Members that in Assembly Questions reference was made (in AQW 24140/22-27) to the adoption of a new model for the valuation of the student loan book and the treatment of earnings projections from 1 April 2025.

Pádraig Delargy joined the meeting at 10:06am

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an explanation of the relevant change to the treatment of the student loan book.

Pádraig Delargy declared an interest in that he is a member of the Public Accounts Committee.

### **3.5 AI Research**

The Deputy Chairperson reminded Members that in Assembly Questions (AQW 24010 and 24009) reference was made to AI research – both by the AI Collaboration Centre at QUB which is undertaking an AI ecosystem baseline study and by the Matrix panel which is to report to the Department on related matters in the autumn.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the relevant research papers when available.

### **4. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 19 March 2025.

### **5. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

### **6. UU EPC - Regional Growth Imbalance– oral evidence session**

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 10:07am:

- Gareth Hetherington, Director, Ulster University Economic Policy Centre;  
and
- Dr Eoin Magennis, Principal Economist, Ulster University Economic Policy Centre.

Key issues discussed included: fiscal and spatial strategies; limitations and failures of previous regional balance policy including grant schemes; measures to attract FDI; the impact of devolution; the role of other departments; practices in other

jurisdictions; Green Book valuations; comparator cities and regions; Local Economic Partnerships and co-operation between local and central government; health inequalities; cross-border co-operation; tackling economic inactivity, wage setting in sub-regions of NI; productivity measures; impact of automation and AI; and tourism and value chain improvements.

Pádraig Delargy left the meeting at 11:30am.

The Deputy Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 11:33am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to UU EPC seeking further information on measures of sub-regional skills shortages and providing some commentary on the diagrams in its most recent paper.

Proceedings were suspended at 11:34am.

Proceedings resumed at 11:40am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to revise the order of agenda items.

## **7. Correspondence**

### **7.1 Index**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

### **7.2 Cross-Border Employment**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Ministerial response in respect of cross-border employment issues including taxation and data-sharing.

### **7.3 Westminster Employment Rights Bill**

**Noted:** The Committee a noted Departmental response in respect of an anticipated LCM on the Westminster Employment Rights Bill, providing the details of the consent amendments.

#### **7.4 Taskforce on Motor Insurance**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the response from the Secretary of State for Transport regarding the cross-government taskforce on motor insurance.

#### **7.5 EU Visas**

The Committee considered the response from the Secretary of State for Business and Trade regarding EU visas.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the response to the Deluxe Group, for its information.

#### **7.6 Balmoral Show**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Assembly Engagement Team in respect of the Balmoral Show.

#### **7.7 ADS Group - Skills Development**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a follow up letter to the ADS Group evidence session in respect of the challenge of skills development.

#### **7.8 Invitation - Alliance for Lifelong Learning**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an invitation from the Alliance for Lifelong Learning to an event on Thursday 10 April from 10am-12.30pm in the Long Gallery.

#### **7.9 Employment Tribunals**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of correspondence between a concerned individual and Deborah Erskine MLA relating to employment tribunals.

## **8. Utility Regulator – RP7 Final Determination– oral evidence session**

The following witnesses from the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (the Utility Regulator) joined the meeting at 11:41am:

- John French, Chief Executive Officer;
- Peter Russell, Executive Director of Price Controls, Networks and Energy Futures;
- Elaine Cassidy, Price Controls Director;
- John Mills, Head of Electricity Price Controls; and
- Colin Broomfield, Markets Director.

Key issues discussed included: the impact of Storm Éowyn; revisions to guaranteed service standards; RP7 capital grid development measures to support carbon reduction; the impact of delayed uptake of carbon reduction measures on consumer pricing in RP7; smart metering; interconnection and battery storage policy; energy price shocks; the impact of renewables; the different regulatory regime in GB; and the vires of the Utility Regulator.

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 11:50am.

Emma Sheerin left the meeting at 12:16pm – the Committee lost its decision-making quorum.

The Deputy Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their briefing.

The witnesses left the meeting at 12:33pm.

## **9. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

## **10. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

## **11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting**

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 2 April 2025 at 10:30am in the Game of Thrones Visitor Centre, Banbridge.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 12:34pm.

**Phillip Brett MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**2 April 2025**