



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 10 April 2024

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Ms Sorchá Eastwood MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Mr Mike Nesbitt MLA

Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

Apologies: Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

In Attendance: Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Anthea Matthews (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Craig Mealey (Clerical Supervisor)

Michael Doran (Clerical Officer)



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

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider correspondence item 12 in closed session, near the end of the meeting.

Proceedings moved into public session at 10:02am with a revised order of agenda items

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above

2. Declarations of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson advised the Committee of an informal meeting with representatives of NUS-USI and SSUNI on Tuesday 9 April 2024 for which the Clerk had issued a short summary note.

The Chairperson advised Members that, in Written Answers (AQW9383), the Minister had advised of proposed legislation in respect of credit unions.



4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting of 20 March 2024.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Oral Evidence Session – Research & Development & Innovation Priorities

The Committee noted briefing papers from the Department and Invest NI.

Officials joined the meeting at 10:04am

The Committee received an oral briefing from:

Keith Forster, Director of Innovation, Research and Enterprise Division, Department for the Economy

Eoin McFadden, Head of R&D Policy, Department for the Economy

Dr Vicky Kell, Director of Innovation and R&D, Invest NI

Mr Nesbitt joined the meeting at 10.10am

Ms Eastwood joined the meeting at 10:24am

Key issues discussed included: co-operation with Innovate UK including the development of an Innovation Action Plan; Innovate NI's recognition programme; the focus on Innovation Driven Enterprises; the Knowledge Transfer Partnership; cross-jurisdictional co-operation; the proposed Chief Science and Technology Advisor role; Departmental reports on decarbonisation, hydrogen innovation and Artificial Intelligence; and measures to address regional imbalances.



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Ms Eastwood made a declaration of interest that her husband, an employee of the Department for the Economy, had worked on the development of the Circular Economy policy.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their briefing.

Officials left the meeting at 11:21am

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy and the Executive Office seeking the timeline for appointment and further information on the role of the Chief Science and Technology Advisor.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking;

- information on the drawdown of R&D&I funding by businesses in Northern Ireland;
- information on the level of engagement by Northern Ireland businesses with Innovate NI; and
- sight of the reports commissioned by the Department in respect of the impact of Artificial Intelligence.

7. Departmental Oral Briefing – Advice NI – Debt Relief Order

The Committee noted: briefing papers from Advice NI; related correspondence from the Committee for Justice; and the Department's 2021-22 annual report for the Insolvency Service.

Witnesses joined the meeting at 11:23am

The Committee received an oral briefing from:

Sinead Campbell, Head of Money Debt and Quality, Advice NI; and

Linda Wilson, Debt Practitioner, Advice NI



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Key issues discussed included: changes to Debt Relief Orders in other jurisdictions; Bounce Back loans; regulation in respect of buy-now-pay-later retailer credit offerings.

Mr McGuigan made a declaration of interest that he had made use of a debt management plan.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their briefing.

Witnesses left the meeting at 11:56am

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking information on the level of Bounce Back business loans that had led to personal debt liability and the Department's plans to reform Debt Relief Orders.

Mr McGuigan left the meeting at 11:58am

Mr Delargy left the meeting at 11:58am

8. Delegated Legislation - Employment Rights – Increase of limits

The Committee noted the statutory rule: SR2024/86 The Employment Rights (Increase of Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024.

9. Delegated Legislation – Period Products

The Committee considered the draft SR 2024/000 The Period Products (the Department for the Economy Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 and agreed the following motion:

Agreed: "That the Committee for the Economy has considered SR 2024/000 The Period Products (the Department for the Economy Specified Public



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Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 and subject to the ESR's report, recommends that it be affirmed by the Assembly.”

Proceedings were suspended from 12:00noon and resumed in public session at 12:01pm.

10. Correspondence

10.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

10.2 DfE: Planning delays and renewable energy developments

The Committee considered a Ministerial response to the Committee in respect of planning delays affecting renewable energy developments and the establishment of a related cross-departmental group.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to Renewable NI, for its information.

10.3 DfI: Planning processes, fees and delays and renewable energy infrastructure

The Committee considered a response from the Minister for Infrastructure in respect of the planning process, fees and delays associated with renewable energy infrastructure including in respect of the work of the Planning Appeals Commission.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to Renewable NI and the Committees for Justice and Infrastructure, for their information.

10.4 DAERA: Planning delays and large-scale renewable developments

The Committee considered a response in respect of delays relating to DAERA and the approval of large-scale renewables.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to Renewable NI, for its information.

10.5 Energy Legislation and Incentives

Noted: The Committee noted a response in respect of the timings of energy legislation relating to: the non-Domestic RHI scheme; the Utility Regulator Bill; the Offshore Renewable Energy Bill; and the Renewable Energy Support Scheme Bill. The Committee also noted timelines in respect of: energy efficiency support for businesses; renewable electricity generation support schemes; a low carbon heat support scheme consultation; and a net zero accelerator debt and equity fund.

Mike Nesbitt commented that his party is unlikely to support accelerated passage for non-Domestic RHI legislation.

10.6 Renewable Energy Generation Incentive scheme

The Committee considered correspondence including the post project evaluation (PPE) of the Northern Ireland Renewable Obligation (NIRO) scheme and information relating to the Offshore Renewable Energy Action Plan (OREAP) consultation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the final OREAP when available and also seeking an explanation in respect of the buy-out fund and mutualisation information included in the NIRO PPE.

10.7 Utility Regulator Bill

The Committee considered a Departmental response indicating that the Utility Regulator Bill would be subject to further consultation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Utility Regulator, forwarding the response and seeking its views on the additional legal powers that it believes that it needs in order to deliver on net zero.

10.8 Grid Connection Charging Policy



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The Committee considered correspondence indicating that the Department and the Utility Regulator appear to be considering changes to the grid connection charging policy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Utility Regulator seeking its commentary on the need for changes to the grid connection charging policy.

10.9 Energy Strategy Action Plan 2024

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Energy Strategy Action Plan 2024 including planned changes to the NI Sustainable Energy Programme.

10.10 Energy Strategy Action Plan – capital spending.

Noted: The Committee noted a response to Committee queries in respect of the Energy Strategy Action Plan capital spending which indicated that such spending was at a very low level.

10.11 Fuel Poverty Levels in NI

The Committee considered a Departmental response relating to fuel poverty in NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for Communities seeking clarity on fuel poverty levels in NI compared to GB.

10.12 Restricted correspondence

The Committee deferred consideration of this correspondence until a closed session later in the meeting.

10.13 Audits/Reviews: Skill-Up; Energy Skills; Childcare

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of an audit of childcare support for students; childcare upskilling for individuals wishing to work in that sector; an energy skills audit and a review of Skill-Up

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the final review of Skill-Up and the childcare upskilling audits, when available.



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Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the 2024 Skills Council annual report.

10.14 Apprenticeship Levy

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister in respect of the need for reform of the apprenticeship levy.

Sinead McLaughlin expressed dissatisfaction at the quality of the response from the Minister.

10.15 Quality Assurance Agency

Noted: The Committee noted a response to Committee queries in respect of the Quality Assurance Agency and the development of a new approach to external quality assurance for HE Institutions.

10.16 Tuition Fees and MaSN

The Committee considered a Departmental response indicating that: there was no timeline for a review of HE funding; the MaSN cap was based on an equitable distribution of student places and that recurrent costs per additional undergraduate were around £5k per student.

Sinead McLaughlin and David Honeyford expressed disappointment at the response arguing that the current regional distribution of students was not equitable and that a review of HE funding was clearly required.

Noted: The Committee noted the related correspondence.

10.17 and 10.18 Sub Regional plans

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence indicating that sub regional economic development plans will be launched in the autumn 2024 and that the Department will brief on the plans in June.

10.19 Magee Taskforce



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Noted: The Committee noted a Press Release on the launch of the Magee Taskforce

10.20 Invest NI

Noted: Members noted a response to Committee queries relating to the implementation of the Invest NI report findings including comparisons of . Selective Financial Assistance and support provided per job created in different district council areas

10.21 ALB – return on investment

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of return on investment for Arms Length Bodies.

Mike Nesbitt indicated that he did not accept that the return on investment measure for ALBs was not appropriate and this appeared to contradict misleading assurances provided by officials at a recent oral briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write again to the Department requiring the provision of return on investment figures or equivalent measures for the relevant ALBs.

10.22 Review of ALBs

Noted: The Committee noted a response in respect of the Executive review of ALBs which began in the last mandate including references to a DoF Public Bodies Bill.

10.23 UEFA 2028 Business Case

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of the UEFA 2028 business including a reference to GVA of £100m associated with the event.

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the overall value to the economy of UEFA 2028 beyond the GVA measure.



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10.24 Changes to the Price Marking Order

Noted: Members agreed to note correspondence from the Department in respect of possible changes to the Price Marking Order in NI.

10.25 Grant-in-Aid support

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence relating to an increase of £40m for Grant-in-Aid support as set out in the Spring Supplementary Estimates for 2023-24.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write again to the Department seeking a breakdown of the £40m of extra Grant-in Aid spending.

10.26 DfE Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23

The Committee considered the Department's Annual Report and Accounts for 2022-23.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking the final loss figures for the Presbyterian Mutual Society.

10.27 NRC Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23

Noted: The Committee noted the Northern Regional College Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23.

10:28 Tourism NI

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Partnership Agreement between the Department and Tourism NI.

10.29 Capital Investment Update

Noted: The Committees noted correspondence the Department's capital investment progress in March 2024.

10.30-10.32 Windsor Framework Queries



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Noted: The Committee noted that in Departmental responses to Committee Windsor Framework queries in respect of: the Customs Duty Waiver Scheme, UK Internal Market Scheme; and Business to Consumer parcels, the Department had declined to provide any information in respect of the above as the UK government is the responsible body.

10.33 MRPQ Framework

The Committee considered correspondence between an Inter Parliamentary Forum and SoS for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities indicating that the development of the framework on mutual recognition of professional qualifications (MRPQ) has been paused

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek its views on and input to the MRPQ framework.

10.34 OIM Report

Noted: The Committee noted the 2023-24 annual report on the operation of the UK internal market from the Office for the Internal Market.

10.35 Safety of Toys

The Committee considered correspondence from a House of Lords Committee to the Department for Business and Trade in respect of EU measures relating to the safety of toys

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity as to the NI economic impact of the proposed changes by the EU to regulations in respect of the safety of toys

10.36 CBAM

The Committee considered correspondence from a House of Lords Committee to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero in respect of the carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM).



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Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity as to the NI economic impact of the proposed changes by the EU to regulations in respect of CBAM.

10.37 SEM

The Committee considered correspondence from a House of Lords Committee to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero regarding the Single Electricity Market (SEM) – previously considered on 13 March 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity as to the NI economic impact of the proposed changes by the EU to regulations in respect of SEM.

10.38 Pay Transparency Directive

The Committee noted a paper from the ECNI and NIHRC arguing that the Executive should adopt the EU Pay Transparency Directive (PTD) by June 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity as to the Department's plans in respect of the PTD and the implications for employers of its adoption.

10.39 Finance Ministerial Statement

Noted: The Committee noted the Finance Minister's written statement setting out the overall Executive financial envelope for 2024-25

10.40 Joint Concurrent Meeting

The Committee considered a response from the Speaker indicating his consent for the plenary chamber to be used for a one-off joint concurrent committee meeting on 29 May 2024.

Agreed: The Committee noted the correspondence and agreed to invite Dr Deirdre Hughes OBE to also brief on her report on careers issues at the joint concurrent meeting.

10.41 Enhanced Flood Relief Scheme



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The Committee considered correspondence in respect of a Ministerial Direction relating to an enhanced flood relief scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and seek clarity as to whether Treasury oversight was required for the outworking of this Ministerial Direction.

10.42 ESR

Noted: The Committee noted the fifth and sixth report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

10.43 NICVA

Agreed: The Committee noted correspondence from Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) and agreed to invite it to brief the Committee on the economic impact of the loss of EU funding.

10.44 NICMA

Agreed: The Committee noted correspondence from the Northern Ireland Child Minding Association (NICMA) and agreed to invite it to brief the Committee on recruitment, retention and unregistered childminders.

10.45 Transmission investment Ltd

Noted: The Committee noted a briefing note from Transmission Investment Ltd in respect of a new interconnector.

10.46 City of London

Noted: The Committee noted a letter of thanks from the City of London Corporation following an informal meeting with the Chairperson.

10.47 Re-Gen Waste

Agreed: The Committee agreed that owing to forward work programme pressures, it would be unable to schedule a visit to Re-Gen Waste in Newry.

10.48 Quality Assurance Agency



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Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to meet informally with the Quality Assurance Agency, diary permitting.

10.49 Digital Regulation Co-operation Forum

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to meet informally with the Digital Regulation Co-operation Forum (DRCF), diary permitting

10.50 BelCAT

Agreed: The Committee agreed that owing to forward work programme pressures, it would be unable to schedule a briefing on the BelCAT – the Belfast Centre for Arts and Technology.

10.51 Electrical Safety First (ESF)

Agreed: The Committee agreed that owing to forward work programme pressures, it would be unable to schedule a briefing from ESF on electrical safety training to support net zero homes.

10.52 North Channel Wind

Agreed: The Committee agreed that owing to forward work programme pressures, it would be unable to schedule a briefing from North Channel Wind on off-shore wind turbine development.

10.53 Retail NI

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing from Retail NI on its Business Crime Report.

10.54 Momentum Conference

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation from NI Chamber of Commerce to the Momentum economic conference event on Thursday 18 April 2024 at the Galgorm.

10.55 Fuel Margins



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Noted: The Committee noted a Competition and Markets Authority update on its review of fuel margins.

10.56 Economic Education

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence to the Minister in respect of economics education from a concerned individual.

Proceedings continued in closed session from 12:24pm

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in respect of the Non-Domestic RHI scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the way forward for the Non-Domestic RHI Scheme and seeking a related closed session briefing on 17 April 2024.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a draft of its Forward Work Programme.

Members noted that the visit to the North West may be rescheduled to 19 June 2024 or September 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reschedule the visit to the North West 19 June 2024 or September 2024. The Committee also agreed to defer the briefing from Transmission Investment Ltd.

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

Proceedings resumed in open session at 12:35pm



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12. Any Other Business

The Chairperson noted that during the previous ministerial oral briefing to the Committee, no reference had been made no reference to the Magee taskforce which was the subject of a subsequent press release.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister seeking an explanation of the above. The Committee also agreed to write to the taskforce inviting it to brief the Committee on the way forward for developments at Magee.

Sorcha Eastwood referred to an APG meeting on Skills

There was no other business.

13. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Committee for the Economy will be at 9:30am on Wednesday 17 April 2024 in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy



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17 April 2024