



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 26 February 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 David Honeyford MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Ms Emma Sheerin MLA

Present via video conferencing:

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin 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 10:02am.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Unspent Childcare Allocation

The Chairperson reminded Members that during Economy Minister's Questions on 24 February 2025 and in response to AQO 1590/22-27, the Minister indicated £1.8m which had been allocated from DE to DfE for interventions to support childcare providers in 2024-25 was unspent. The Minister also referred to research which was to be produced in March 2025 in respect of issues facing childcare providers which would inform appropriate interventions in order to support the related skills pipeline.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the relevant childcare providers research and details of the interventions for this important sector.

3.2 Gender Pay Gap

The Chairperson reminded Members that during Economy Minister's Questions on 24 February 2025 and in response to AQO 1590/22-27, the Minister indicated that

gender employment gap research had been completed. The Department had also previously advised of research which would provide “a unique worker level assessment on a number of themes related to the Good Jobs agenda such as pay, job security, flexibility, work intensity and meaningful work”.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the gender employment gap and related Good Jobs research.

3.3 Interconnector Delays

The Chairperson reminded Members that during Economy Minister’s Questions on 24 February 2025 and in response to AQT 1051/22-27, the Minister had referred to delays to the development of the North South interconnector. The Chairperson noted the consequences this may have for security of supply in Northern Ireland and support for renewables in this jurisdiction.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the progress of the North South interconnector.

4. Draft Minutes

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

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. NIC-ICTU – Good Jobs Employment Bill consultation response – oral evidence session

The following witnesses from the Northern Ireland Committee – Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC-ICTU) joined the meeting at 10:04am:

- Gerry Murphy, ICTU Assistant General Secretary;
- Jacquie White, Ulster Teachers' Union and Chairperson of NIC-ICTU;
- John-Patrick Clayton, Unison and Vice-Chairperson of NIC-ICTU;
- Clare Moore, Equality Officer, ICTU; and
- Kevin Doherty, Employment Law Expert, ICTU

Key issues discussed included: the definition of a good job; the level of co-design in respect of the anticipated Employment Bill; the need for cultural change in industrial relations; zero hours contracts, detriment short of dismissal, notice periods for industrial action; employee motivation and the link between productivity and rights; sectoral collective bargaining; the impact on small businesses; economic inactivity; paid carers and parental leave; insecurity in the workplace; perceptions of trade unions; engagement with businesses; work-life balance; and linkage to other Executive strategies.

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 10:41am.

Sinéad McLaughlin declared an interest in that she is a member of a trade union.

Pádraig Delargy declared an interest as the previous co-sponsor of PMBs relating to carers' leave and to work-life balance.

Pádraig Delargy declared an interest as a family member works for Foras na Gaeilge.

Mr Delargy recorded his support for the Irish language strikers.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 11:46am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to NIC-ICTU seeking sight of its submission to the consultation on the Employment Bill.

7. The Deluxe Group – NI Creative Industries – oral evidence session

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 11:47am:

- Dr Colm Connolly, Managing Director, Deluxe Group;

- Richard Hill, Business Development Director, Deluxe Group; and
- Ruth Smyth, Head of Human Resources, Deluxe Group.

Key issues discussed included: showcasing NI creative talent; the need for an industry-led taskforce/champion; gaming and creative intellectual property; infrastructure and planning challenges; the need for “plug and play” industrial zones; the skills pipeline; apprenticeship insurance issues; AI challenges; post-Brexit visa issues; rates relief; and R&D tax credits.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 12:37pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the written paper from Deluxe Group to the Committee for Infrastructure.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Association of British Insurers in respect of apprenticeship insurance issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Rt Hon Lisa Nandy MP, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport: calling for NI representation on the Creative Industries Taskforce; expressing support for the Universal Studios development at Bedford; and highlighting intellectual property issues and the challenge of AI to the creative industry in NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Rt Hon Jonathan Reynolds MP, the Secretary of State for Business and Trade highlighting issues in respect of NI creative industry employees from GB who require visas to work in the EU and the absence of government guidance and support.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to give further consideration to issues relating to the creative industry in NI.

Proceedings were suspended at 12:39pm

Proceedings resumed at 12:44pm

8. Delegated Legislation - FE Student Support

The Committee considered the statutory rule entitled: SR 20/2025 The Further Education (Student Support) (Eligibility) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and agreed the following motion:

Agreed: “That the Committee for the Economy has considered SR 20/2025 The Further Education (Student Support) (Eligibility) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, has no objection to the rule”.

9. Delegated Legislation - HE Student Support

David Honeyford declared an interest in that his child has a student loan.

Emma Sheerin and Kate Nicholl declared interests in that they had student loans.

The Committee considered the statutory rule entitled: - SR 32/2025 The Education (Student Support, etc.) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity as to why NI has a lower Resource Accounting and Budgeting (RAB) charge than England; and seeking clarity as to why tuition fee loans are offered to certain GEMS students and not to other post-graduate students studying in NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer consideration of the SR pending a response to the above.

10. Correspondence

10.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

10.2 Ministerial Evidence

Noted: The Committee noted the Minister's response accepting the Committee's invitation to provide oral evidence on 9 April 2025.

10.3 Post-19 SEN Funding and Governance.

The Committee considered a Departmental response on Post-19 SEN funding and governance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to Caleb's Cause NI.

10.4 Organisational Development and Transformation (ODT) Programme.

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response on the Organisational Development and Transformation (ODT) Programme.

10.5 Domestic Abuse Safe Leave

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response on Domestic Abuse Safe Leave, providing an estimated timeline – regulations are to be in place by autumn 2026.

10.6 Grid Connection Charging Framework

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response on the grid connection charging framework, which is out to consultation.

10.7 HMS Caroline

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response on HMS Caroline.

10.8 Transmission Investment Ltd

Noted: The Committee noted further correspondence from Transmission Investment Ltd highlighting the absence of interconnection policy and likely impact on the LirlC interconnector.

10.9 Level 4/5 Uptake

Noted: The Committee noted a response clarifying a UCAS report which commented on Level 4/5 uptake in NI.

10.10 CPPA Seminar Artificial Intelligence in the Public Sector

Noted: The Committee noted a save the date invitation to the CPPA Seminar - The Potential for Artificial Intelligence in the Public Sector - Tuesday 15th April (0930 – 1300) at Riddel Hall, Queen's University Belfast.

10.11 Sundial Sustainable

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from Sundial Sustainable relating to solar car parks.

10.12 Ocean Winds

The Committee considered a request from Ocean Winds for an informal meeting with the whole Committee in respect of off-shore renewable development.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to decline the request.

10.13 Social Value Bill

Noted: The Committee noted the consultation on the Private Members Bill – the Social Value Bill.

10.14 Employment Tribunal

Noted: The Committee noted an email from a concerned individual requesting progress on their employment tribunal complaint.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to take evidence from Fibrus Networks Ltd as part of a joint concurrent meeting with the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed its forward work programme, as amended.

12. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

13. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 5 March 2025 at 10:00am in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings Stormont.

Proceedings continued in closed session from 12:47pm.

14. Draft Budget 2025-26 – Committee deliberations

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of the draft budget 2025-26.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Committee for Finance indicating that in the absence of relevant impact assessments setting out the effect of budget changes to skills and apprenticeships place, HE places, FE places and FE pay, it was unable to make a final assessment of the draft 2025-26 budget.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:57pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

5 March 2025