



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 3 June 2026

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings

Present: Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Mr Declan Kearney MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Present via video conferencing:

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Apologies: Ms Diane Forsythe (Deputy Chairperson)

In Attendance: Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Katie McMaster (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Sarah Dowd (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in open session at 10:04am.

Appointment of a Temporary Chairperson

In the absence of the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, nominations were sought for the role of Temporary Chairperson.

Jonathan Buckley nominated David Honeyford as Temporary Chairperson.

Sinead McLaughlin seconded the nomination.

In the absence of any other valid nominations David Honeyford assumed the role of Temporary Chairperson.

Proceedings were suspended at 10:05am.

Proceedings continued in public session at 10:06am.

Declan Kearney joined the meeting at 10:06am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

Sinead McLaughlin declared an interest in respect of bringing forward a Private Member's Bill on regional balance.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Informal Meeting

The temporary Chairperson reminded Members that, as agreed, the Chairperson met informally with Microsoft Ireland on 27 May 2026, on matters relating to AI in NI. The Clerk has circulated a summary note.

Noted: The Committee noted the Clerk's summary.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a formal oral evidence session from Microsoft Ireland, in respect of its manifesto on Artificial Intelligence in Northern Ireland.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 27 May 2026.

5. Matters Arising

5.1 Neonatal Parental Leave

Declan Kearney expressed concerns in respect of the delay to the development of neonatal parental leave rights which are expected to be included in the anticipated Employment Rights Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Executive Office expressing its concern in respect of the delay to the enhancement of neonatal parental leave arrangements and urging the Executive to expedite this matter. The Committee further agreed that Members would determine their positions on the overall principles of the Bill subsequently.

6. Regional Economic Balance - DfE and Invest NI – oral and written evidence

The following officials joined the meeting at 10:11am:

- Giulia Ni Dhulchaointigh, Social and Regional Economy, DfE;
- Alison Currie, Chief Development Officer, Invest NI; and
- Ethna McNamee, Head of Regional Business - Western Region, Invest NI.

The evidence session was recorded by the Official Report.

Phillip Brett joined the meeting at 10:34am and assumed the Chairpersonship.

Key issues discussed included: measuring the impact of Invest NI interventions and the reliability of data; supporting entrepreneurs, scaling up and inward investment with a view to delivering good jobs everywhere in NI; addressing innovation deficits including through a Green Innovation Park development; supporting innovation in tourism offerings; the new City of Derry Invest NI office and hub; interaction with other support funds including Go Succeed and the Shared Island Fund, and its support for sustainability projects; the Regional Property Strategy – planning and infrastructure issues and supporting the ‘plug and play’ advanced factory model; Antrim Technology Park / Mallusk Technology Park; Mandeville project delays; Local Economic Partnerships progress; and culture change at Invest NI.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 11:26am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and Invest NI seeking:

- information and examples on the use of innovation vouchers to develop tourism offerings;
- information on the initiatives the Department and Invest NI are taking forward to address planning delays and to unlock investment;
- information on the budget and priorities for the Regional Property Programme;
- the timescales for the development of the Mandeville development and a planning permission update;
- information on the disposal of Antrim Technology Park and how the funds generated were used to promote regional balance; and how

Invest NI supports Antrim Technology Park and Mallusk Technology Park;

- information on the Belfast Local Economic Partnership Action Plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and Invest NI indicating that in order to drive regional balance Invest NI targets should be based on outcome i.e. jobs promoted, productivity improved and financial investment secured, rather than on activity.

7. HE widening participation – DfE – oral and written evidence

The following officials joined the meeting at 11:28am:

- Annette Palmer, Interim Director of Strategic Policy and Services, DfE;
- Davina McCay, Head of Access, Inclusion and Participation Branch, DfE; and
- Joanne McGlone, Deputy Principal in Widening Participation and Higher Education, DfE

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 11:41am

Key issues discussed included: widening participation target groups including adult learners and those from a rural background; funding of supports; focus on Higher Education retention and employability outcomes; engagement with schools including improved careers advice support and Further Education colleges; data challenges and potential additional administrative burden; developing pathways and a culture of aspiration; linkage to the Higher Education funding review; barriers to part-time learning including the need for childcare supports; and the need for cross-departmental working to support attainment raising.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.
The officials left the meeting at 12:19pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further detail on the focus of the targets for the revised policy and how better supports will be linked to the wider HE funding review.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to seek further information on part-time learners – their age, gender and caring responsibility and what childcare and other supports may be required to widen their participation.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to forward correspondence from Queen's University Belfast to the Department on cuts to places and the impact on widening participation.

Declan Kearney left the meeting at 12:19pm
Proceedings were suspended at 12:19pm
Proceedings continued in public session at 12:25pm.

8. Widening Participation Adult Learning – AONTAS

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 12:25pm:

- Conor Thompson, Head of Advocacy and Policy, AONTAS; and
- Dr Eve Cobain, Senior Research Officer, AONTAS.

Key issues discussed included: community education; the impact of continuing formal education to 18; metrics of adult participation; learner voice fora; cross-border interventions; Peace Plus funding; and Higher Education and micro-credentials delivery including AI-related qualifications through community education hubs.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 1:03pm.

- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department:
- indicating support for community education and the development of learner voice fora in order to support delivery development;
 - seeking clarity as to how it is helping to ensure consistent delivery of community education and related best practice including through cross-border interventions;
 - seeking clarity as to how it is to support community education providers to deliver micro-credentials including those related to Artificial Intelligence; and
 - seeking data on the extent to which admissions to Higher Education and Further Education in the last 5 years include learners from the community education sector.

Diana Armstrong left the meeting at 1:03pm.

9. SL1 - Industrial Training Levy

David Honeyford recorded concerns that the exemption threshold from the levy had not increased from £80k for some years and that small construction companies were now obliged to pay the levy which was not the original policy intention.

Noted: The Committee noted the proposed statutory rule: Industrial Training Levy (Construction Industry) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue a call for views on Citizen Space and to publish the proposed rule and related papers on the Committee's delegated legislation webpage.

10. Correspondence

10.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

10.2 LCM Sporting Events Bill

Noted: The Committee noted a Legislative Consent Memorandum, which is to be laid in respect of the Sporting Events Bill, pending a Departmental briefing in June.

10.3 Childcare and Employment Rights Bill

Noted: The Committee noted a Ministerial response in respect of engagement with childcare providers regarding the Employment Rights Bill.

10.4 5 Year Sustainability Plan

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence advising that a draft Financial Planning Framework, setting out current commitments, financial implications and operational challenges is under development.

10.5 Smart Metering

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response, in respect of smart metering.

10.6 Hydrogen Fuel

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental briefing paper on the feedback to the consultation on a sustainable, regional approach for the production, storage, transport and use of hydrogen as a fuel.

10.7 Budget Efficiencies and Peace Plus Projects

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of office consolidation, budget efficiencies and details on a number of Peace Plus projects.

10.8 Voluntary Surrender Scheme

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the voluntary surrender scheme proposed by the Community Foundation NI for the anticipated £30 per household electricity bill allocation.

10.9 Energy Strategy Action Plan

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Energy Strategy Action Plan 2026 and Action Plan 2025 Report, pending a Departmental briefing.

10.10 Energy Strategy Update

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Department to the Public Accounts Committee, providing an update on Energy Strategy targets.

10.11 CfC - Retention and Disposal Schedules

Noted: The Committee noted a memo from the Committee for Communities, in respect of retention and disposal schedules.

10.12 NISCCA - Careers Portal

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association highlighting issues in respect of the careers portal etc..

10.13 CfF - Nil Responses

Noted: The Committee noted nil responses from the Committee for Finance to the calls for evidence for the Petroleum Bill and the Utility Regulator Bill.

10.14 CfF - Outturn for 2025-26

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance in respect of the restatement of outturn for 2025-26.

10.15 CfF - NISRA Population Projections

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance regarding the NISRA report on NI population projections.

10.16 CfF - Transformation Fund

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance, including a copy of a letter to the Department of Finance, in respect of the Transformation Fund Tranche 2 statement relating to the Department for Communities Pathways to Work and Well-being programme.

10.17 66th Report of the ESR

Noted: The Committee noted the 66th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, which includes The Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (General) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2026 and The Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (Employment and Earnings) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2026. The ESR had no commentary on these rules.

10.18 Youth Assembly Monthly Update

Noted: The Committee noted the Youth Assembly monthly update for May 2026.

10.19 QUB – Budget Pressures

Members considered correspondence from QUB in respect of budget pressures and a potential loss of student places.

Members recorded concerns in respect of: the potential loss of student places and reduced capital spending to support R&D; the adverse impact on WAPP students; the suggestion that the MaSN might be exceeded; and the possibility that all island student mobility might be reduced.

Members commented on UK Government block grant constraints and the Economy Minister's student fee decisions as well as the linkage of all of these pressures to the anticipated Higher Education funding review.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister seeking her comment on the issues raised by QUB in respect of its resource and capital budget, MaSN etc..

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to schedule an evidence session from Queen's University Belfast in respect of its resource and capital budget, MaSN etc..

10.20 DSIT - Omnibus on AI

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Department for Science Innovation and Technology to the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee on the Digital Omnibus on AI.

10.21 Hopp Belfast

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence regarding the launch of Hopp Belfast, a new electric bike sharing service.

10.22 NI Tourism Alliance Invitation

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to the NI Tourism Alliance Strategy launch and conference.

10.23 Home Heating Oil

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual in respect of the increasing costs of home heating oil for the elderly, pending CMA briefing on its review of domestic heating oil, scheduled on 1 July 2026.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer a briefing from the district councils regarding Go Succeed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a Departmental briefing in respect of the feedback to the consultation on hydrogen policy on 10 June 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to undertake additional meetings over summer recess in order to address its legislative programme.

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 the next meeting

The next scheduled Economy Committee meeting will begin on Wednesday 10 June 2026 at 10:00am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 1:12pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

10 June 2026