



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 28th May 2025

Meeting Location: Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

Present: Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Ms Emma Sheerin MLA

Present by video-conferencing:

Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Apologies: Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

In Attendance: Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Katie McMaster (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Stuart Gilmour (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in public session at 9:35am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Informal Meetings

The Chairperson reminded Members of the Committee's informal meeting with Spirit Aerosystems on 21 May 2025.

The Chairperson also reminded Members that, as previously agreed, he had met informally with the Association for Project Safety on 27 May 2025.

Noted: The Committee noted that summary notes of both informal meetings had been circulated.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to send a letter of thanks to Spirit Aerosystems.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 21 May 2025.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Department for the Economy – LCM Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill – evidence session

The following officials joined the meeting at 9:37am:

- Annette Palmer, Director of Tertiary Education Division, DfE; and
- Louise Stevenson, Deputy Head of Vocational Qualification Reform Branch, DfE.

Emma Sheerin joined the meeting at 9:37am

The evidence session was reported by Hansard.

Key issues discussed included: UK European Network Information Centre (ENIC) fees charged in respect of overseas qualifications; devolved responsibility for the UK ENIC service; and the related request for legislative consent for this aspect of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their briefing.

The officials left the meeting at 9:43am.

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 9:43am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for Justice indicating that it was content to support the UK Government's request for legislative consent in respect of this aspect only of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy seeking further clarity on the costs to the Careers Service of UK ENIC's services.

7. Department for the Economy – 2025-26 Budget Update - evidence session

The following officials joined the meeting at 9:44am:

- Johanna Parke, Budgeting & Business Partnering, DfE;
- Susan Butler, Head of Future Years, DfE;
- Niamh McGarvey, Head of In-Year, DfE; and
- Mark Lee, Director of Higher Education Division, DfE.

Jonathan Buckley rejoined the meeting at 9:45am.

Diana Armstrong joined the meeting at 9:57am.

Padraig Delargy joined the meeting at 10:07am.

The evidence session was reported by Hansard.

Key issues discussed included: the budget 2025-26 allocations; pressures on Higher Education, a flat cash allocation, maintenance grants, the structural deficit and steady student numbers; Shared Prosperity Fund support for Invest NI and 2 Further Education colleges; NI Screen's budget cut; associated costs with the Northern Ireland Protocol; HMRC costs; a 3% increase in support for skills places and a 8% increase in support for Higher Level Apprenticeships.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their briefing.

The officials left the meeting at 10:18am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy seeking:

- a breakdown of the allocation to the universities in Northern Ireland, for the periods of 2023-24, 2024-25 and for 2025-26;
- an update on and the timescales for the review of HE funding; and
- confirmation that City and Growth deal projects linked to the universities will continue to be supported despite funding pressures on Higher Education.

- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on the plans, and timeline, to develop Fort George.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on the Net Zero Accelerator Fund.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information and a breakdown of costs associated with the Northern Ireland Protocol / Windsor Framework, since its inception.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking information on whether City of Derry Airport support meets state aid rules.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to NI Screen in respect of its reported budget cut and seeking its commentary on the impact on its business plan and related City and Growth Deal projects.
- Agreed:** The Committee noted its upcoming visit to Queen's University Belfast and agreed to give further consideration as to how to include Ulster University in its scrutiny of Higher Education funding pressures.

8. Department for the Economy – Renewable Electricity Support Scheme - evidence session

The following officials joined the meeting at 10:21am:

- Jimmy Graham, Director of Business, Gas, Minerals and Renewable Electricity, DfE;
- Zoë Crowe, Onshore Renewable Electricity Team, DfE; and
- Niccoló De Francesco, Onshore Renewable Electricity team, DfE.

Key issues discussed included: a renewable electricity price guarantee scheme; the role of SONI, the Utility Regulator and the Low Carbon Contracts Company; the £300m over 15 year costs associated with the support scheme and the likely £8 levy on domestic electricity bills and 1% levy on business bills; £2 million costs accrued thus far; community benefits schemes options; terms and conditions consultation; Contracts for Difference auction; related primary legislation; developer-led planning; microgeneration; repowering; boosting grid capacity; and a Strategic Investment Board steering group to assist achieving 80% renewable electricity generation by 2030.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 11:14am.

The Committee noted with considerable concern the absence of reasonable levels of clarity in respect of: the likely costs to businesses; the approach to planning renewable electricity developments; a coherent plan for providing measurable community benefits in the localities of these developments; the general lack of progress; and the extended timelines in respect of the development of the REPG scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department indicating its concerns and seeking clarity on the community benefit options associated with the renewable electricity price guarantee scheme.

9. Correspondence

9.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

9.2 Insolvency (Amendment) Bill

Agreed: The Committee agreed a timetable for its consideration of the Insolvency (Amendment) Bill.

9.3 Storm Éowyn Compensation

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister in respect of her statements related to Storm Éowyn compensation.

9.4 SME Management and Leadership

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Department in respect of UU EPC recommendations relating to improving management and leadership in SMEs.

9.5 Freight Container Safety Regulations.

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the delay to the roll-out of freight container safety regulations.

9.6 Smart Metering

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of smart metering roll-out costs.

9.7 Green Skills Action Plan

The Committee considered an invitation from the Minister to the Chairperson to the launch of the Green Skills Action Plan, on Thursday 29 May 2025 in the Custom House.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to attend, diary permitting.

9.8 Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill confirming that engagement with business and other stakeholders will continue as the work to update employment law continues.

9.9 Tourism Marketing

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response disputing the suggestion that marketing for tourism offerings favours public sector investments.

9.10 International Relations Strategy

Noted: The Committee noted a holding response from the Executive Office in respect of the International Relations Strategy, which is in development.

9.11 Balmoral Show

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of a summary note of an informal meeting with Young Farmers at the Balmoral Show.

9.12 Disclaimed DfE 2023-24 Annual Accounts

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Public Accounts Committee to the Permanent Secretary/Accounting Officer DfE in respect of disclaimed DfE 2023-24 Annual Accounts.

9.13 5-Year Business Plans

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of Department of Finance guidance to departments on 5 year business plans.

9.14 June Monitoring

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the June Monitoring commissioning information from the Department of Finance.

9.15 British Deaf Association's AI report

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the British Deaf Association's report on Artificial Intelligence.

9.16 Post-19 SEN and Caleb's Cause

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence to the Minister in respect of Post-19 SEN and Caleb's Cause.

9.17 US Tariffs

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to the Secretary of State NI in respect of US tariffs and the duty reimbursement scheme.

9.18 Concerned Individual

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from a concerned individual to the Lady Chief Justice in respect of complaint around employment tribunals.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

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

11. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

12. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 4 June 2025 at 10:30am in the South West Regional College, Enniskillen.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 11:21am.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

4 June 2025