



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 18 March 2026**

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

**Present:**

Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Ms Diane Forsythe (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Declan Kearney MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

**Present via video conferencing:**

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

**Apologies:**

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

**In Attendance:**

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Claire Milliken (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Katie McMaster (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Sarah Dowd (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in open session at 10:02am.

## **1. Apologies**

Apologies were as indicated above.

## **2. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

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

### **3.1 Agenda**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to adopt a revised tabled agenda.

### **3.2 Seagate Visit**

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee undertook a visit to Seagate Technologies on Wednesday 11 March 2026 and that a summary note of the informal meeting had been circulated.

**Noted:** The Committee noted the circulated summary note of the informal meeting.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to send a letter of thanks to Seagate Technologies.

## **4. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 10 March 2026.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 11 March 2026.

## 5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

## 6. Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR) – oral and written evidence

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 10:04am:

- John French, Chief Executive, NIAUR;
- Peter Russell, Executive Director Price Controls Networks and Energy Futures, NIAUR;
- Barbara Cantley, Director, Consumer Protection and Compliance and Enforcement, NIAUR;
- Colin Broomfield, Director, Markets, NIAUR; and
- Brian Mulhern, Director of Networks and Energy Futures, NIAUR

Kate Nicholl joined the meeting at 10:12am

Key issues discussed included: guaranteed service standards; smart metering – timelines, data collection, costs, tariff structures and consumer engagement; interconnection; the timeline for developing energy bill cost reduction measures; regulation of domestic home heating oil; customer care register; the Utility Regulator (Preparation for Decarbonisation) Bill etc.; offshore renewable energy and climate change targets.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 11:10am.

Some Members recorded concerns in respect of the limited staff resource available to the Department to support offshore renewable policy development.

Other Members indicated that anticipated staff deployments would address all such concerns.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Utility Regulator seeking a timeline for the interaction with the Department on the development of domestic energy bill cost saving measures and for sight of related correspondence.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking a timeline for the development of offshore renewable energy policy and the development of offshore renewable installations.

## **7. Higher Education Financial Needs Assessment – Departmental oral and written evidence**

The following officials joined the meeting at 11:13am:

- Graham Miller, Acting Director of Higher Education, DfE;
- Elaine Dolan, Head of the Higher Education Funding Review, DfE;
- Joanne Hendry, Head of Higher Education Finance, DfE; and
- June Faccini, Head of Higher Education Research, DfE

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to continue proceedings in closed session at 11:21am.

Key issues discussed included: the financial needs assessment report, related timelines and redacted information; HE institutions' views on the report; the review of the UU multi-campus model; cross-subsidisation, capital and research funding; post-graduate award funding flexibility; and the MaSN cap.

Phillip Brett left the meeting 12:03pm – Diane Forsythe assumed the chairpersonship.

Phillip Brett rejoined the meeting at 12:05pm and resumed chairpersonship of the meeting.

Proceedings continued in open session at 12:25pm

The Committee noted clarification from the Department that it was the Minister's preference rather than an absolute requirement that there should be consensus among the HE institutions in respect of the Terms of Reference of the wider review of Higher Education.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.  
The officials left the meeting at 12:26pm.

Proceedings were adjourned at 12:26pm

Proceedings resumed at 12:33pm

Sinead McLaughlin left the meeting at 12:33pm

## **8. Post Graduate Tuition Fee Loans (PGTFL) – Departmental oral and written evidence**

The following officials joined the meeting at 12:33pm:

- Graham Miller, Acting Director of Higher Education, DfE;
- Shauna Mullan, Head of Higher Education Policy, DfE; and
- Jonathan O'Callaghan, Head of Higher Education Student Finance, DfE

Key issues discussed included: the protocol for consultations; HM Treasury review of student support packages; numbers of NI students eligible for the PGTFLL; and student engagement and marketing of the new PGTFLL.

Kate Nicholl left the meeting at 12:48pm

The Committee suspended its consideration of this agenda item at 12:50pm and moved to the next item.

## **9. Parental Bereavement Regulations - Departmental oral and written evidence**

The following officials joined the meeting at 12:50pm:

- Colin Jack, Director of Business and Employment Regulation Division, DfE;
- Geraldine Lavery, Head of Employment Relations Work/Life Balance and EU Exit Branch, DfE; and
- Joseph Ward, Employment Relations Work/Life Balance and EU Exit Branch, DfE.

This session was recorded by Hansard.

The Committee considered: the Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (General) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2026 and the Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (Employment and Earnings) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2026.

**Noted:** The Committee noted the 60<sup>th</sup> report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules and that there was no commentary on the Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay (Miscarriage) Regulations (NI) 2026.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department to make the Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (General) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2026 and the Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (Employment and Earnings) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2026.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.  
The officials left the meeting at 12:55pm.

The Departmental PGTFLL officials rejoined at 12:58pm  
The Departmental PGTFLL officials left at 1:03pm

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking information on NI postgraduate student numbers and information on the marketing of the PGTFLL changes to employers etc..

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking a timeline for the UU multi-campus review and sight of the related report; and

seeking sight of the redacted information contained within the Financial Needs Assessment report

## **10. Correspondence**

### **10.1 Index**

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

### **10.2 Trade Union Recognition**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Ministerial response confirming that reducing the workplace recognition threshold for trade unions from 21 to 10 workers will be delivered through delegated legislation.

### **10.3 Apprenticeships issues**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of apprenticeships.

### **10.4 Spring Statement**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a memo from the Committee for Finance in respect of the outworkings of the additional funding allocated to the Executive following the Chancellor's Spring Statement.

### **10.5 High Street and Small Business Challenges**

The Committee considered a memo from the Committee for Finance confirming willingness to undertake joint working on High Street and small business challenges.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content for the Clerk to return with proposals on how to undertake the joint working.

### **10.6 Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a memo from the Committee for Finance on its Committee Stage report on the Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill.

### **10.7 59th report of the ESR**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the 59th report of the ESR which include no commentary on Draft SR: The Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 and S.R. 2026/3: The Further Education (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026.

### **10.8 House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee - Eco-design**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero in respect of eco-design requirements for external power supplies etc..

### **10.9 House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee - AI**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to Department for Science, Innovation

and Technology in respect of the simplification of the implementation of harmonised rules on Artificial Intelligence and how the Stormont brake might be applied in this case.

### **11. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

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

### **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 25 March 2026 at 10:00am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 1:05pm.

**Diane Forsythe MLA**

**Deputy Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**25 March 2026**