



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 1 July 2026

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Ms Diane Forsythe (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Mr Declan Kearney MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Present by video-conferencing:

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

In Attendance:

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Michael Greig (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 9:30am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

David Honeyford declared an interest in respect of his daughter being a student at Trinity College Dublin.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 ADS Group

The Chairperson reminded Members that he met informally with representatives of the Aerospace, Defence, Security and Space Group on Monday 29 June 2026.

Noted: The Committee noted a summary document of the informal meeting that had been circulated previously.

3.2 Fols Summer Recess

The Chairperson advised Members that it is usual to delegate authority to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson to submit views on the releasing or withholding of information in any non-routine or contentious Freedom of Information requests received by the Committee during summer recess.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to delegate this authority to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 23 June 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 24 June 2026.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. SL1 The Gas Safety (Installation and Use) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2026.

The following official joined the meeting at 9:32am:

- Seán Keogh, Principal Inspector for Gas, Utilities and Docks Group, HSENI.

Kate Nicholl joined the meeting at 9:32am

Declan Kearney joined the meeting at 9:34am

The Chairperson thanked the official for his evidence.

The official left the meeting at 9:40am.

Noted: The Committee noted the proposed statutory rule: The Gas Safety (Installation and Use) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 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.

7. SL1 The Education (Student Support.) (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee considered the proposed statutory rule: The Education (Student Support.) (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department to make the proposed rule.

8. Industrial Training Levy (Construction Industry) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department to make the proposed rule.

Padraig Delargy joined the meeting at 9:42am.

9. The Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme (Closure) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee considered the draft regulations: The Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme (Closure) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and agreed the following motion:

Agreed: “That the Committee for the Economy has considered: The Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme (Closure) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, recommends that it be affirmed by the Assembly.”

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Bill Office on the Royal Assent process.

10. Retention and Disposal Schedule

The Committee considered an amendment to the retention and disposal schedule for the Department for the Economy, laid before the Assembly by the Department for Communities.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the schedule as drafted.

Declan Kearney left the meeting at 9:47am.

11. Draft Forward Work Programme

Noted: The Committee noted that the Public Accounts Committee will take forward the matters relating to Northern Regional College’s annual report and accounts.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing from Atlantic Technological University in respect of its all-island admissions pilot.

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

12. Forward Work Programme – Renewable Electricity Generation Bill

Agreed: The Committee agreed to launch its call for evidence for the Renewable Electricity Generation Bill. The Committee noted a list of stakeholders and agreed to issue: a related a memo to other statutory committees; a letter to stakeholders; a Citizen Space survey; a newspaper advertisement and a press release.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking the Delegated Powers Memorandum, Keeling Schedule and Equality Impact Assessments for the Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to refer the Bill to the Examiner of Statutory Rules for scrutiny.

13. Forward Work Programme – Regional Balance Bill

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue a press release in respect of the call for evidence for the Bill.

The Committee agreed to alter the order of its agenda.

Declan Kearney rejoined the meeting at 9:54am.

14. Correspondence

14.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

14.2 NI Skills Council

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister advising that a refreshed model of the NI Skills Council is to be brought forward.

14.3 Contingency Budget Decisions

The Committee considered correspondence from the Permanent Secretary and tabled correspondence from the NI Skills Council in respect of contingency actions taken in respect of the budget, which will reduce and/or pause apprenticeship and skills programmes.

Diana Armstrong joined the meeting at 9:58am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister: expressing its concerns in respect of the impact on economic growth and encouraging the Department to undertake an assessment of the impact of the contingency budget decisions; and to seek clarity on the ring-fencing of skills funding.

14.4 Community Education

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence advising that it cannot provide figures for adult learners coming to FE/HE from the community education sector but may be able to do so for FE from 2026-27 going forward.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Departmental correspondence to AONTAS.

14.5 DfE Accounts

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence, providing a timeline for publication of 2025-26 DfE Group Accounts.

14.6 NRC Accounts 2024-25

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence, providing a timeline for publication of 2024-25 Northern Regional College accounts, pending the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) consideration of the matter.

14.7 HE Widening Participation

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of queries relating to Higher Education widening participation measures.

14.8 Childcare Pre-employment Checks

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of changes to childcare pre-employment checks.

Kate Nicholl noted that the changes were yet to take effect.

14.9 Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Bill

Noted: The Committee noted a notification that the Minister has laid a memorandum indicating she is not to seek the consent of the Assembly for Westminster to legislate in respect of the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Bill.

14.10 Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill DPM

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence, including the Delegated Powers Memorandum for the Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Delegated Powers Memorandum to the Examiner of Statutory Rules for scrutiny.

14.11 Utility Regulator and Hydrogen

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence, clarifying that the Department wishes to appoint the Utility Regulator as the economic regulator for hydrogen but believes this is outside of the scope of the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill.

14.12 Co-operative Sector Report

Noted: The Committee noted Ministerial correspondence including a copy of an embargoed report on the co-operative sector.

14.13 BCC Local Economic Partnership Action Plan

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence, providing information on the Belfast City Council Local Economic Partnership Action Plan.

14.14 Domestic Abuse Safe Leave Regulations

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the timing of the Domestic Abuse Safe Leave regulations which are to be drafted by autumn 2026 along with guidance.

14.15 Tourism Innovation

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of tourism innovation and supporting workshops etc...

14.16 Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental Press Release announcing £1m funding for Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, which will be hosted in Belfast this summer.

14.17 Irish Medium Education

The Committee considered a Departmental response, providing more information on Irish medium education initial teacher education provision.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Departmental response to the Committee for Education.

14.18 CfJ: Industrial Tribunals

Noted: The Committee noted a memo from the Committee for Justice including correspondence received from an individual regarding a proposal for reform of the Industrial Tribunals (Northern Ireland) Rules of Procedure.

14.19 NICCY: Children's Rights Assessments

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) calling for mandatory Children's Rights Assessments on all legislation.

14.20 Cfl Utility Regulator Bill

Noted: The Committee noted a Committee for Infrastructure nil response in respect of the Utility Regulator Bill.

14.21 CfF: Oireachtas Public Service Performance Report

Noted: The Committee noted a Committee for Finance memo, including the Oireachtas Public Service Performance Report.

14.22 DBT: Industrial Capacity and Decarbonisation

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from Department of Business and Trade to the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee in respect of a framework of measures for the acceleration of industrial capacity and decarbonisation in strategic sectors.

14.23 DSIT: Cyber Resilience Act

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Department for Science, Innovation & Technology to the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee in respect of adding to the Windsor Framework the EU's Cyber Resilience Act.

14.24 HoL NISC: Industrial Accelerator Act

The Committee considered a copy of correspondence from House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to the Department of Business and Trade in respect of establishing a framework of measures for the acceleration of industrial capacity and decarbonisation in strategic sectors.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department in respect of its concerns linked to the EU's proposals for a related regulation for inclusion in the Windsor Framework.

14.25 HoL NISC: One Stop Shop

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to NI Secretary of State and Rt Hon Nick Thomas-Symonds MP in respect of the follow-up inquiry on Strengthening Northern Ireland's voice in the context of the Windsor Framework and in respect of the one-stop-shop development for NI/GB trade.

14.26 HoL NISC: Vehicle Emission Type Approval

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to NI Secretary of State in respect of the emission type approval procedures for light passenger and commercial vehicles.

14.27 SoS NI: Single Electricity Market

Noted: The Committee noted a Secretary of State for NI response in respect of the Single Electricity Market and recoupling with GB electricity market.

14.28 Microsoft Ireland AI policy

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from Microsoft Ireland in respect of their AI policy.

14.29 NI Fiscal Council Sustainability Report 2026

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the NI Fiscal Council Sustainability Report 2026 on the absence of an Executive budget.

14.30 Pivotal Report on Improving the Institutions

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Pivotal report on Improving the institutions: suggested reforms to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive.

14.31 JRF Report: Disability and Poverty in Northern Ireland

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of a recent report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), Disability and Poverty in Northern Ireland.

14.32 UU Strategic Policy Unit's report

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the UU Strategic Policy Unit's report: Unlocking NI's Potential: A Framework for Economic Transformation.

14.33 Hunting with Dogs Bill

The Committee considered tabled correspondence from CAERA in respect of its call for evidence for the Hunting with Dogs Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to provide a nil response.

14.34 NIPSO Insolvency

Noted: The Committee noted further correspondence from a concerned individual in respect of an insolvency case considered by NIPSO.

14.35 Utility Regulator Bill Written Submission

The Committee considered further written submissions to the call for evidence for the Utility Regulator Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to publish these, and any further responses.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Utility Regulator and the Department, seeking their comments on the written submissions.

14.36 Petroleum Bill Written Submission

The Committee considered further written submissions to the call for evidence for the Petroleum Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to publish these, and any further responses.

14.37 Interconnection

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Minister in respect of interconnection policy.

14.38 DfC: Home Heating Oil Scheme

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence relating to the Department for Communities (DfC) home heating oil scheme and changes to the Energy (NI) Order 2003 to allow for the collection of relevant data.

14.39 June Investment

Noted: The Committee noted the June capital investment summary report for June 2026.

14.40 Cobalt in toys

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence between the Department for Business and Trade and the HoL NI Scrutiny Committee in respect of the safety of toys and the use of cobalt.

14.41 Sea Across Society

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to the Sea Across Society event on Tuesday 3 November 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a relevant Departmental response to Community Energy Northern Ireland for its information.

Proceedings were suspended at 10:07am

Proceedings resumed at 10:09am

15. QUB – student places / HE budget issues

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

- Professor Sir Ian Greer, President and Vice Chancellor; QUB;

- Professor Margaret Topping, Pro Vice Chancellor for Global Engagement, QUB;
- Dr Ryan Feeney, Vice President and Registrar, QUB; and
- Mr Alistair Finlay, Chief People Officer & Interim - VP Student & Corporate Service QUB.

Kate Nicholl declared an interest in respect of being formally employed by QUB.

Key issues discussed included: the Higher Education structural budget deficit; contingency budget issues; the review of HE funding; widening participation measures; Magee expansion; Irish language measures and associated costs; international students and the impact of recent events; exceeding the MaSN cap; HE alignment with health sector needs; developing industry ready soft skills; barriers to skills development and linkage with FE – social mobility and an integrated tertiary education sector; RoI student costs and all-island mobility; RoI government funding costs; the Dundalk Institute of Technology collaboration; AI workplaces; and the retention of NI graduates in local employment.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 11:32am.

- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to QUB in respect of its previous, current and planned engagement with An Cumann Gaelach and seeking clarity as to how QUB is to support the use of the Irish language.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to QUB seeking sight of its correspondence to the Magee Expansion Taskforce offering to engage with the project.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the risk to City and Growth Deal projects due to the contingency budget, and in particular the capital shortfall.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister seeking: her commentary on QUB's suggestion in respect of exceeding the MaSN and the impact on other Higher Education providers; and details of her engagement with RoI ministers in respect of RoI students and that jurisdiction funding the costs of those students in NI.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity as to how barriers to Higher Education entry are being reduced through better linkage between Higher Education and Further Education.

Declan Kearney left the meeting at 11:36am

- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on graduate employment figures and in particular NI domiciled graduates and their tendency to work in Northern Ireland.

Proceedings were suspended at 11:36am

Proceedings resumed at 11:45am

16. Invest NI oral and written briefing – Boston event / Cantor Fitzgerald decision

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 11:45am:

- Kieran Dongahue, Chief Executive at Invest NI;
- Anne Beggs, Chief Commercial Officer at Invest NI; and
- Mark Lee, Acting Deputy Secretary for Economic Policy at the Department for the Economy (DfE).

Diana Armstrong declared an interest in respect of related legal proceedings.

Kate Nicholl declared an interest in respect of her husband's company had received support from Invest NI.

Pádraig Delargy declared an interest in respect of a family member's firm had received support from Invest NI.

Key issues discussed included: Invest NI Board appointments; the Cantor Fitzgerald timeline, decision-making, confidentiality issues and the impact of the decision; regional balance issues; dual market access and Foreign Direct Investment; supporting indigenous business; infrastructure issues; audit and governance issues; the Good Jobs Bill; the Memorandum of Understanding with Ukraine; the contingency skills budget impact and Assured Skills Academies; and social media support.

Diana Armstrong left the meeting at 12:54pm.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 1:01pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity as to: the timing overlap in respect of the Golden Bridges event and the application process for the Invest NI Board; whether the Minister was aware of Máirtín Ó'Muilleoir's application; and whether there was full disclosure of the criminal records of all Board applicants.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Invest NI seeking the estimated value of the Cantor Fitzgerald investment.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Invest NI seeking a breakdown of the investment, re-investment and job creation by local government district.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Invest NI seeking an update on the Memorandum of Understanding with Ukraine, including any opportunities which have been identified and the engagement Invest NI have had thus far.

17. Any other business

There was no other business.

18. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next scheduled Economy Committee meeting will begin on Wednesday 26 August 2026 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 1:02pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

1 September 2026