



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 6 May 2026

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings

Present: Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Diane Forsythe (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA
Mr David Honeyford MLA
Mr Declan Kearney MLA
Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Present via video conferencing:

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Apologies: Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

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 10:02am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 UU Prospective Job Losses

The Chairperson reminded Members that Ulster University had recently made an announcement in respect of a significant number of prospective job losses. The Committee noted that the UU Vice Chancellor was scheduled to shortly join a UK Government trade mission promoting the interests of Northern Ireland businesses overseas.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reschedule the evidence session on UU prospective job losses until later in June when all parties could give evidence at the same Economy Committee meeting.

3.2 Causeway Coast and Glens Deal

The Chairperson referred Members to the announcement of the £129m Causeway Coast and Glens Growth Deal, which has been formally signed by the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance to welcome the Deal and to seek clarity in respect of the progress of the Mid South West Region Growth Deal.

3.3 Leslie Orr Retirement

The Chairperson advised Members of the recent retirement of Leslie Orr after 15 years of service as Director of ADS Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Mr Orr to thank him for his service to the Aerospace, Defence, Security and Space Industry in Northern Ireland and to wish him well for his retirement.

3.4 CAERA Informal Meeting

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee had met informally with the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to discuss the impact of rising fuel costs, particularly on the agricultural sector and on rural communities on Tuesday 5 May 2026.

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

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 29 April 2026.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. NUS-USI - student mobility on the island of Ireland

The following witness joined the meeting at 10:06am:

- Ben Friel, President, National Union of Students – Union of Students in Ireland

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

Key issues discussed included: the student experience of student mobility on the island of Ireland; housing accommodation and cost of living issues in RoI; the need for changes to the Educational Maintenance Allowance; the proposed reform of NI A-Levels; different HE funding models; NICS capacity to support the HE funding review; the need for a one-stop shop for NI school pupils to obtain RoI university admission information; the need for “London weightings” for loans and grants to study in RoI; cross-departmental and cross-jurisdictional nature of student mobility issues and the need to escalate to cross-jurisdictional bodies; exam results date alignment; NI brain drain and impact of MaSN cap; visa restrictions affecting overseas students and cross-border study.

Padraig Delargy left the meeting at 10:46am
The Chairperson thanked the witness for his evidence.
The witness left the meeting at 10:55am.

7. Irish Universities Association - student mobility on the island of Ireland

The following witness joined the meeting at 10:56am:

- Lewis Purser, Director of Learning, Teaching and Academic Affairs, Irish Universities Association

The following witness joined the meeting at 10:56am via video conferencing:

- Professor Stephen Byrne, Deputy President and Registrar, University College Cork

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

David Honeyford also declared an interest as a member of the Public Accounts Committee.

Key issues discussed included: the Trinity College Dublin NI student feasibility study; alignment of Leaving Certificate and A-level results dates; perception of A-levels; impact of A-level reform; loans and grants in RoI; drop-off of applications and acceptance by NI students to RoI universities; Brexit perception issues; the attraction of the NI Higher Education offer; the use of conditional offers by UK universities; the uptake of Leaving Certificate in RoI vs A-level uptake in NI; and the non-EU student population in RoI.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 11:47am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Education in respect of A-Level reform, encouraging the Minister to ensure the voice of students is heard; seeking information on the evaluation of any impact of the A-Level reform on student mobility; and seeking information on any engagement the Minister has had with his counterparts in RoI in respect of student mobility and the re-evaluation of the university scoring mechanisms for A-levels in RoI as a result of the reform.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for the Economy urging the Minister to escalate student mobility issues to the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) and the British-Irish Council (BIC).

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to both the Minister for Education and the Minister for the Economy encouraging both Ministers to develop a one stop shop platform of information for students on: grade equivalencies, financial information, housing information etc. for study in RoI; and to revise the careers intervention to include earlier advice on RoI HE study options.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the National Union of Students – Unions of students in Ireland (NUS-USI) seeking information on its views on a Higher Education funding model and the efficiencies and cuts that it would propose in order to better fund Higher Education.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Irish Universities Association seeking further information on the Trinity College Dublin NI student feasibility project.

8. The Education (Student Support and Repayment) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee considered the proposed statutory rule: The Education (Student Support and Repayment) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

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

9. Correspondence

9.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

9.2 Employment Rights Bill

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response referring to impact assessments for the anticipated Employment Rights Bill.

9.3 Enhanced Investment Zone

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Enhanced Investment Zone (EIZ), including an update on the outworking of the EIZ skills pilot and the methodology for the economic impact assessment.

9.4 HE Financial Needs Assessment

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response including further information in respect of the HE Financial Needs Assessment.

9.5 Labour Market Partnership

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response including the plans for all of the Labour Market Partnerships.

9.6 Smart Metering

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of smart metering, indicating that a Delivery Group is to be established and a roll-out plan is to be developed.

9.7 Internal Irish language Policy

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence which provided information on the development of the Department's internal Irish language policy.

9.8 Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill

The Committee considered a call for evidence from the Committee for Finance in respect of the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reply to the Committee for Finance with a nil response.

9.9 CfEd: Private Member's Bills

The Committee considered a call for evidence from the Committee for Education in respect of two Private Member's Bills: Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill and the Irish-medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reply to the Committee for Education with a nil response.

9.10 SONI: Renewable Target

Noted: The Committee noted SONI's response in respect of the 80% renewable target.

9.11 CAERA: Fertiliser and Fuel Costs

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of a memo from the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, which includes correspondence from the Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in respect of fertiliser and fuel costs.

9.12 Investing Activity Report

Noted: The Committee noted the Department for the Economy Investing Activity Report for April 2026.

9.13 Farnborough International Airshow 2026

The Committee considered an invitation to the Chairperson to attend the Farnborough International Airshow 2026 taking place 20-24 July 2026.

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

9.14 Belfast Harbour Masterplan

Noted: The Committee noted a reminder of an invitation to the Launch and Presentation of Belfast Harbour Masterplan 2025-50 on 19 May 2026.

9.15 Concerned Individual

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual in respect of gas smart metering issues.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Opinion Survey to be used to gather views on the Petroleum Licensing and Exploration (Repeal) Bill from members of the public at the Balmoral Show.

Agreed: The Committee agreed an augmented stakeholder list to be used for the call for evidence for the Petroleum Licensing and Exploration (Repeal) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to postpone the evidence session from Ulster University to late June.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule:

- a Departmental briefing in respect of the Higher Education Widening Participation consultation feedback;
- a briefing from Go Succeed;
- a briefing from Transmission Investment in respect of the LirIC interconnector project; and
- a briefing from the ADS Group.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to hold joint concurrent meetings with the:

- Committee for Education in respect of the Skills Strategy and TransformEd; and
- Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in respect of the Competition Markets Authority review of the domestic heating oil market.

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

11. Any Other Business

11.1 Utility Regulator Briefing

The Chairperson advised Members of evidence from the Utility Regulator in respect of the impact of the Single Electricity Market being decoupled with the electricity market of the rest of the UK.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing from the Utility Regulator in respect of the Single Electricity Market decoupling with the UK and the associated impact on consumers' electricity bills.

12. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next scheduled Economy Committee meeting will begin on Wednesday 20 May 2026 at 10:00am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 11:57am

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

20 May 2026