



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 7 October 2026

Meeting Location: Board Room, Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre

Present:

Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Ms Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Declan Kearney MLA

Mr Peter Martin MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Mr Mike Nesbitt MLA

Apologies:

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

In Attendance:

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Michael Greig (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Aoibheann Baker (Bill Clerk) – Item 1 only

The meeting commenced in closed session at 10:07am.

1. Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill– Bill
Office advice

Aoibheann Baker joined the meeting at 10:07am.

Aoibheann provided advice in respect of the Committee Stage of the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill.

The Chairperson thanked Aoibheann for her advice.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Utility Regulator seeking formal confirmation that an extension of its vires to provide decarbonisation advice to departments in addition to the Department for the Economy would not likely present a resourcing issue.

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

- clarity on the resourcing implications of the extension of the vires of the Utility Regulator to provide decarbonisation advice to departments in addition to the Department for the Economy;
- an update on its work in respect of the regulation of the home heating oil market as regards vulnerable customers and breach of contract issues; and
- clarity on the development of Guaranteed Service Standards and the extent to which these might provide a legislative vehicle for the extension of home heating oil market measures including protections for the vulnerable and those addressing breach of contract issues.

Aoibheann Baker left the meeting at 10:20am.

Proceedings continued in public session at 10:21am.

2. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

3. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Chairperson's Business

4.1 AMIC Opening

The Chairperson advised Members that he attended the formal opening of AMIC yesterday in his capacity as Chairperson and encouraged those Members who could stay on to take the tour after the meeting.

4.2 Hospitality Rates Review

The Chairperson advised Members that he had been contacted by representatives of the hospitality who had reportedly been advised of an ongoing rates review process.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Land and Property Services (LPS) seeking clarity on the reported rates review and whether it would extend beyond the hospitality sector.

5. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 30 September 2026.

6. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

7. Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill – Agreement of Report

The Committee considered a draft of the Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill Committee Stage report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Background section, as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Committee Approach section, as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Consideration of the Bill section, as drafted.

- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the Clause by Clause Scrutiny section, as drafted.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the Appendices, as drafted.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the Executive Summary section, as drafted.
- Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to include an extract from the minutes of 7 October 2026 in the report.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the report should be published as its 8th report of the mandate.

8. LCM Sporting Events Bill - Agreement of Report

The Committee considered tabled papers including forwarded correspondence from the Minister for Sport, Tourism, Place and Digital Government, in respect of the Sporting Events Bill and amendments including provisions relating to recurring events.

- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to accept a written assurance from the Department that the recurring events amendments do not alter the policy content of the Bill.

The Committee considered a draft of the Sporting Events Bill LCM report.

- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the Background section, as drafted.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to Consideration of the LCM section, as amended so as to include reference to the tabled papers and the Committee's acceptance of Departmental assurances.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the Appendices, as amended in order to include the tabled papers.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the Executive Summary section, as drafted.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the amended report should be published as its 9th report of the mandate.

9. Higher Education – Department for the Economy

The following officials joined the meeting at 10:28am:

- Graham Miller, Acting Director of Higher Education Division, DfE
- Laura Murphy, Acting Deputy Director Higher Education Division, DfE
- Mark Lee, Interim Director of Magee Expansion Division, DfE

Key issues discussed included: new MaSN tolerances, the timing of the changes and the prospect of related fines; reciprocity in respect of RoI domiciled students, the related £12m cost to NI universities and RoI government engagement; Ulster University redundancy process; GEMS rescoping and capital plan; Allied Health Professional and Medical student numbers; UU multi-campus costs; Magee expansion; the Brain Gain report; marketing to support GB students studying in NI; and the Higher Education Review.

Officials left the meeting at 11:28am

Proceedings were suspended at 11:28am.

Proceedings resumed at 11:34am.

10. Higher Education - Ulster University, Queen's University Belfast and the Open University

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 11:34am:

- Professor Sir Ian Greer, President and Vice Chancellor, QUB;
- Dr Ryan Feeney, Vice President and Registrar, QUB;
- Professor Paul Seawright, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Ulster University; and
- Michael Bower, Director, Open University

Key issues discussed included: new MaSN tolerances, the timing of the changes and the prospect of related fines; rollover of funding for additional MaSN places; Diamond Review and OU support for excluded groups; the need for a broad-based HE system; UU redundancy process and Living Wage issues; reduction in international student numbers; RoI government funding for Allied Health Professional places and the prospect of reciprocity payments; the impact of student accommodation on student mobility and Magee expansion; the Brain Gain study and the value of targeting GB students for NI study; capital risk and university reserves; research funding and economic multipliers; and student loan levels and the wider review of Higher Education.

Witnesses left the meeting at 1:03pm

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

- an evidence session on the Brain Gain report;

- further information on how the Magee 26-27 student place expansion is to be afforded and clarity as to the rollover of support for these extra place in subsequent years;
- further information on the MaSN cap by institution including the relevance of campus and the impact on “fresher” recruitment of the new flexibilities;
- the revised capital plan from GEMS; and
- an update on the engagement with the RoI government in respect of the buying of NI student places for RoI domiciled students given the estimated £12m cost of the lack of reciprocity and the apparent increase in the disparity to perhaps 3:1.

11. Correspondence

11.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

11.2 Credit Unions (Amendment) Bill

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence updating the Committee on the expected timeframe for Executive consideration of the Credit Unions (Amendment) Bill.

11.3 Local Innovation Partnerships Fund Update

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence, providing an update on the Local Innovation Partnerships Fund (LIPF) projects including iPHARMA.

11.4 Update on DfE ARA 2025-26

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance in respect of the timing of the laying of the Department for the Economy’s annual report and accounts for 2025-26.

11.5 ISNI Report September 2026

Noted: The Committee noted the ISNI investing activity report for September 2026.

11.6 CfC - Renewable Electricity Bill

The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Communities in respect of the Renewable Electricity Bill, querying issues around community benefit payments.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy, seeking clarity on the issues raised in the correspondence.

11.7 North South Interconnector

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from SONI, advising that the North South interconnector is scheduled for energisation in 2031.

11.8 Parcel Tariffs

Noted: The Committee noted further correspondence from the Committee for Finance in respect of tariffs on business-to-business parcel movements from GB to NI.

11.9 Claim Management Regulation

Noted: The Committee noted a memo from the Committee for Finance indicating that the Minister for Finance may consider the need for legislation to extend FCA regulation of claim management companies to NI.

11.10 Rural Impacts of the Openreach Digital Switchover

The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, suggesting a joint concurrent session in respect of the rural impacts of the Openreach Digital Switchover.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to decline the joint concurrent session owing to heavy legislative forward work programme.

11.11 Monitoring Potential Gas Leakages

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to the Department for the Economy in respect of monitoring potential gas leakages from offshore green and renewable energy infrastructure.

11.12 Anti-Poverty Strategy Planned Actions

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for Communities to the Department for the Economy in respect of its Anti-Poverty Strategy planned actions.

11.13 Rural Affairs Research

Noted: The Committee noted a forwarded copy of the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council's Rural Affairs research from the Committee for Communities.

11.14 Youth Assembly Newsletter

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the September Youth Assembly Newsletter.

11.15 Home Heating Oil Review

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Competition and Markets Authority, following on from the recent session on the home heating oil review.

11.16 AMIC Opening

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to the Chairperson to the opening of AMIC on Tuesday 6 October 2026.

11.17 UCL Report: The Working Lives Project

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the UCL report: The Working Lives Project – study of labour market non-compliance.

11.18 Fermanagh Chamber of Commerce

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Fermanagh Chamber of Commerce, notifying the Committee of its establishment.

11.19 Skills Briefing

The Committee considered a request from Software NI and Workplus to jointly brief the Committee on practical solutions for the NI skills system.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule the briefing.

11.20 LRA 50th Event

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to the Labour Relations Agency 50th Anniversary event on 18 November 2026

11.21 Libraries Deliver Event

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to the Libraries Deliver drop-in event Tuesday 3 November 2026.

12. Draft Forward Work Programme

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule evidence sessions with Derry City and Strabane District Council and Londonderry Chamber of Commerce and Belfast Chamber of Commerce on 11 November 2026 in respect of the Regional Balance Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a joint evidence session with Invest NI and the Department on 18 November 2026 in respect of the Regional Balance Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in respect of the interaction of the Regional Balance Bill with the Rural Needs Act.

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

13. Any other business

There was no other business.

14. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next scheduled Economy Committee meeting will begin on Wednesday 14 October 2026 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 1:06pm.

Diane Forsythe MLA

Deputy Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

21 October 2026