



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 14 October 2026

Meeting Location: Room 30

Present: Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
Mr David Honeyford MLA
Mr Declan Kearney MLA
Mr Peter Martin MLA
Mr Mike Nesbitt MLA

Present via video conferencing:

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Apologies: Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

In Attendance: Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Michael Greig (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Katie McMaster (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Aoibheann Baker (Bill Clerk) – Item 6 only

The meeting commenced in closed session at 10:00am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Regulation of the Home Heating Oil sector

The Chairperson referred Members to the UK Government's response to the CMA report into home heating oil, which indicated that the UK Government and the Executive may take forward a scheme to identify home heating oil users, in particular vulnerable customers with enforcement measures in respect of dispute resolution.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister seeking clarity on how she is going to take this matter forward with the Utility Regulator and the UK Government.

4. Draft Minutes

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

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Utility Regulator Bill – Departmental evidence session and informal clause by clause

The following officials joined the meeting at 10:02am:

- Kellie Sprott, Director, Energy Strategy and Corporate Services, DfE;
- Catriona Harkin, Director, Energy Operation, DfE
- Paul Skillen, Energy Bill Team, DfE; and
- William Deane, Consumer Protection and Community Energy Team, DfE.

Proceedings were recorded by the Official Report.

Declan Kearney joined the meeting at 10:06am.

Key issues discussed included: Guaranteed Service Standards; climate change obligations; the scope of decarbonisation advice to other departments in respect of the Executive's Energy Strategy etc.; staffing and resourcing consequences; the CMA report and the anticipated Ministerial response; the role of the Consumer Council NI (CCNI) and the NI Trading Standards Service (TSS) in respect of the home heating oil market; comparisons between the remit and role of Ofgem and the Utility Regulator (UR); and the overlap between the remit and roles of the CCNI and the Utility Regulator.

The Committee informally deliberated on likely amendments to the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill.

Clause 1 (1): power to provide advice, information or assistance to support the Department

The Committee considered amendments relating to:

- the provision of decarbonisation advice to other Departments;
- a clearer definition of the scope of issues where the Utility Regulator may provide decarbonisation advice;
- the extension of the role of the Utility Regulator beyond the Energy Act 2022; and
- measures to ensure protections for the rights of consumers and to address fuel poverty.

Agreed: The Committee informally agreed to give further consideration to the provision of advice to other departments and to accept Departmental assurances in respect of the rest of the above.

Clause 1 (2): provides a qualified duty that the Utility Regulator must, so far as reasonably practicable, comply with any reasonable request.

The Committee considered amendments and commentary relating to:

- more clearly defining reasonable requests and reasonably practicable responses;
- regulatory independence; and
- the costs associated with the enhanced advice role.

Agreed: The Committee informally agreed to accept Departmental assurances in respect of the above.

Clause 1(3): Defines expressions used in Clause 1(1) and 1(2).

The Committee considered amendments relating to an illustrative list of emerging technologies.

Agreed: The Committee informally agreed to accept Departmental assurances in respect of the above.

Clause 2. Commencement and short title

The Committee considered amendments relating to delays to commencement in order to allow for resourcing issues to be resolved.

Agreed: The Committee informally agreed to give further consideration to related amendments.

Assembly Legal Services ECHR Memo

Noted: The Committee noted the European Convention on Human Rights memo.

Other Matters

The Committee considered matters relating to the regulation of home heating oil including the identification of vulnerable customers; protections for breach of contract and domestic price regulation.

Noted: The Committee noted that home heating oil consumers had been subject to considerable unregulated price variations and that proportionate measures were urgently required. The Committee noted also the recent CMA report on these matters and the UK government's response and the differing regulatory regimes in other parts of the UK and in respect of other parts of the energy sector.

Agreed: With considerable regret, the Committee informally agreed to not progress related amendments for this Bill and urged the Department to give consideration to enhancing the role of CCNI and Trading Standards Service in respect of better protection for vulnerable customers from breach of contract issues etc..

The Committee considered suggested amendments relating to: a decarbonisation duty; accountability; consultation; anticipatory investment; just transition; regulation of hydrogen and heat networks; a sunset clause; and the definition of gas to support biomethane development etc.

Agreed: The Committee informally agreed to accept Departmental assurances in respect of the above

Agreed: The Committee agreed to undertake formal clause by clause scrutiny on 21 October 2026.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.
Officials left the meeting at 11:09am

Proceedings continued in closed session from 11:09am.

7. Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill – Informal Deliberations

Aoibheann Baker joined the meeting at 11:10am.

Aoibheann provided advice in respect of an amendment to the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill.

The Chairperson thanked Aoibheann for her advice.

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

- clarity on the timeframe and way forward for home heating oil regulation on foot of the CMA report and the UK Government's recommendations, including a revised role for the Consumer Council NI and Trading Standards Service in this regard;
- information on the fines and enforcement action taken by Trading Standards Service in respect of recent home heating oil breach of contract issues;
- information on the number of decarbonisation queries received from other departments;
- commentary on a revised amendment referring to the provision of advice to the Executive; and
- offshore renewable energy and biomethane Departmental staffing numbers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Utility Regulator seeking information on the number of decarbonisation queries it has received from other departments.

Aoibheann Baker left the meeting at 11:24am.

Proceedings were suspended at 11:24am.

Proceedings resumed in public session at 11:29am.

8. Atlantic Technological University – All-island admissions pilot

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 11:30am:

- Paul Hannigan, VP for Cross-border Engagement, ATU;
- Dr Billy Bennett, Registrar and Chief Academic Officer, ATU;
- Fiona Kelly, Marketing Engagement Manager, ATU;
- Jacinta Ryan, Academic Affairs Manager (Admissions), ATU; and
- JoAnne Kilmartin, Senior Development Officer - North South Engagement Centre, ATU.

Key issues discussed included: the ATU NI recruitment pilot admissions study; access to BTEC results and associated impact of delays to applicants; awareness gap in respect of the Central Application Office (CAO) process and differing careers guidance offers depending on jurisdiction; cultural barriers to all-island mobility; the role of local government; Higher Education points tariffs, quotas and caps for students in the Republic of Ireland (RoI); alignment of results day in NI and RoI; reform of A-level and other qualification points system in RoI; cross-border working; a mixed access pathways approach; accommodation issues; and the value proposition for Higher Education in RoI.

Diane Forsythe left the meeting at 11:56am.

Declan Kearney left the meeting at 12:29pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Atlantic Technological University research to the Department seeking its commentary.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to CCEA asking how it is working with JCQ and other award providers to automate the provision of BTEC results.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 12:42pm.

Padraig Delargy left the meeting at 12:42pm

9. Regional Balance Bill - Convention Rights Memorandum

The Committee considered a memorandum from Assembly Legal Services on the engagement of the Regional Balance Bill with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)/Windsor Framework.

Noted: The Committee noted the memorandum.

10. SL1 The Health and Safety (Miscellaneous Repeals, Revocations and Amendments) Regs

Noted: The Committee noted the proposed statutory rule: The Health and Safety (Miscellaneous Repeals, Revocations and Amendments) 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.

11. SL1 The Gas Safety Management (Amendment) Regs

Noted: The Committee noted the proposed statutory rule: The Gas Safety Management (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.

12. SL1 Employers Liability Compulsory Insurance

The Committee considered the proposed statutory rule: The Employer's Liability (Compulsory Insurance) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2026.

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

13. Correspondence

13.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

13.2 North South Interconnector

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence updating the Committee on the North South Interconnector, which is expected to be completed in 2031.

13.3 Heat Pump Grants

The Committee considered a Departmental response, in respect of heat pump grants, confirming that the Domestic Energy Efficiency and Heat Programme (DEEHP) support scheme is expected to be launched in late 2027.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to the concerned individual, who initially raised the query.

13.4 DfE Response - Industrial Tribunal Rules

The Committee considered a Departmental response, in respect of industrial tribunal rules, confirming that the Department has no plans to revise the relevant rules at this time.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to the concerned individual.

13.5 Office of Industrial Tribunals and Fair Employment Tribunal

The Committee considered a response from the President, Office of the Industrial Tribunals and the Fair Employment Tribunal on industrial tribunal rules.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to advise the concerned individual of the response.

13.6 Gas Safety Regulations

The Committee considered a response from the Department for Communities, in respect of Gas Safety Regulations, confirming that there are currently no plans to introduce new legislation to enhance landlords' rights to gain access to properties for gas safety inspections.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the response to forward to the Housing Associations who raised the issues.

13.7 CfF - Renewable Electricity Generation Bill

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance in respect of the Renewable Electricity Generation Bill.

13.8 CfF - Agency Staff Costs

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance, providing information on agency staff costs by department.

13.9 CfC - Housing (Amendment) Bill

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for Communities to the Department for the Economy in respect of the Housing (Amendment) Bill.

13.10 Cfl - Harbours Bill

The Committee considered a call for evidence from the Committee for Infrastructure in respect of the Harbours Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to provide a nil response.

13.11 Cfl - Tree Protection Bill

The Committee considered a call for evidence from the Committee for Infrastructure in respect of the Tree Protection Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to provide a nil response.

13.12 Cfl - Display of Flags and Emblems Bill

The Committee considered a call for evidence from the Committee for Infrastructure in respect of the Display of Flags and Emblems Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to provide a nil response.

13.13 Ulster University Research

Noted: The Committee noted an email from Ulster University in respect of last week's Higher Education evidence session, confirming that EPC/SPU research on student loans is being finalised.

13.14 Centre for Competitiveness

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Centre for Competitiveness providing additional information.

13.15 DAERA - Regional Balance Bill

Noted: The Committee noted a response from Marine Fisheries Division (Sea Fisheries Policy Branch) in respect of the Regional Balance Bill.

13.16 Valor Power

The Committee considered a PowerPoint presentation and request to brief from Valor Power.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to decline the briefing request due to its heavy legislative work programme.

13.17 CMA Newsletter

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the CMA newsletter.

13.18 Safety Nets

The Committee considered correspondence from Safety Nets in respect of research into social security and devolution.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Committee for Communities.

14. Draft Forward Work Programme

Agreed: The Committee agreed to receive a Departmental briefing in respect of the budget on Tuesday 20 October at 9:30am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a Departmental pre-second stage briefing on 21 October 2026 in respect of the Credit Unions (Amendment) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to start its meeting at 9:00am on 11 November 2026 in order to facilitate attendance at Remembrance services on that date.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing from Renewables NI in respect of the Renewable Electricity Generation Bill on 2 December 2026.

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

15. Any other business

There was no other business.

16. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next scheduled Economy Committee meeting will begin on Tuesday 20 October 2026 at 9:30am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 12:49pm.

Diane Forsythe MLA

Deputy Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

21 October 2026