Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Tuesday 1 September 2026

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings

Present: Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Ms Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Declan Kearney MLA

Present by video-conferencing:

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Apologies: 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 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 Farnborough Air Show

The Chairperson reminded Members that as previously agreed, he had attended the Farnborough Air Show in July 2026 as Chairperson of the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write a letter of thanks to the ADS Group and to seek an update briefing on the work and priorities of the Aerospace, Security, Space and Defence sector.

3.2 Informal Lunch

The Chairperson advised Members that the Committee has been invited to attend an informal lunch with Hospitality Ulster and the CEO of UK Hospitality on Tuesday 8 September 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to attend the informal lunch.

3.3 Centre for Competitiveness

The Chairperson advised Members that he had met informally with the Centre for Competitiveness.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a briefing from the Centre for Competitiveness.

3.4 Late Night Transport Event

The Chairperson advised Members that the Committee has been invited to attend an event in the Long Gallery on Wednesday 16 September 2026 at 10am marking the success of the late-night bus transport project.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move the start time of the Committee meeting on Wednesday 16 September 2026 to facilitate Members' attendance at the event.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 1 July 2026.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Renewable Electricity Generation Bill

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

- Jimmy Graham, Director, Decarbonisation, Gas, Minerals and Renewable Electricity, DfE;
- Rachel Sankannawar, Project Director, DfE;
- Zoe Crowe, Head of Onshore Renewable Electricity, DfE; and
- Nicco De Francesco, REPG Policy Lead, DfE.

Jonathan Buckley joined the meeting at 10:12am.

Key issues discussed included: the Renewable Electricity Generation (REG) financial package consultation which is scheduled for 2027; the REG first auction possibly scheduled for 2028; the achievement of Climate Change targets; grid issues and the roadmap for tackling dispatch down; changes to SONI's conventional generating set rules; consumer protections, security of supply and community benefits; the Offshore Renewable Installation Bill delayed to the next mandate; and Departmental capacity to deliver related legislative changes.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.
The officials left the meeting at 10:33am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was likely to support the Bill at Second Stage.

The Committee agreed to revise the order of its agenda.

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

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed the following motion:

"That the Committee for the Economy has considered: SR 136/2026 The Education (Student Support.) (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026, and subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, has no objection to the rule."

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

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed the following motion:

"That the Committee for the Economy has considered: 137/2026 the Industrial Training Levy (Construction Industry) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 and subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, has no objection to the rule."

9. Correspondence

9.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

9.2 City and Growth Deal Funding

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence providing further information on City and Growth Deal funding.

9.3 City and Growth Deal Funding

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for Finance to the Department in respect of City and Growth Deal Capital funding.

9.4 QUB Invitation

The Committee considered an invitation from Queen's University Belfast to hold a Committee meeting in the new Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre on Wednesday 7 October 2026 to coincide with AMIC's official opening.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold an external meeting at AMIC on Wednesday 7 October 2026.

9.5 Ministerial Response: QUB Budget Pressures

Noted: The Committee noted a Ministerial response in respect of QUB budget pressures.

9.6 Ministerial Response: HE Funding Issues

Noted: The Committee noted a Ministerial response in respect of Higher Education funding issues.

9.7 Reducing barriers to HE

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of reducing barriers to Higher Education from Further Education.

9.8 Graduate Employment Figures

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of graduate employment figures and regional retainment.

9.9 UCAS Data

The Committee considered correspondence from UCAS indicating that, post A-level results day, there were currently 10,070 applicants placed at a Higher Education provider in Northern Ireland in 2026. This is an increase of 450 (+5%) since 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an update from QUB/UU on how clearance is operating in 2026 in comparison to 2025.

9.10 Proposed Skills funding cuts

The Committee considered a Ministerial response in respect of proposed skills funding cuts. The Minister advised that no funding was specifically ring-fenced for skills programmes.

Padraig Delargy referred to the role of the UK Government in not providing appropriate funding to the Executive or for skills.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a briefing from the Further Education colleges on skills provision, the breakdown of courses lost in particular in rural areas and the impact of the contingency budget.

9.11 Local Innovation Partnership Fund

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Local Innovation Partnership Fund.

9.12 ETI Evaluations of SEN provision in FE

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence in respect of two ETI evaluations into SEN provision in FE colleges. The review recommends a statutory FE SEN/D framework and statutory post-school assessment with clearer regional expectations, improved data collation and benchmarking of outcomes are recommended.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and seek clarity on the way forward for the recommendations.

9.13 CEF Inflationary Pressures

Noted: The Committee noted a Construction Employers Federation press release in respect of inflationary pressures in the construction sector and calling for the NI Executive to agree a 2026/27 budget and set course for multi-year budget.

9.14 Invest NI Board Resignation

Noted: The Committee noted Ministerial correspondence advising of the resignation of Peter Lynch from the Board of Invest NI, who will be replaced by Maria McAllister.

9.15 Invest NI Golden Bridges Event

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Invest NI Board appointments and timing of the advice on the Golden Bridges event.

9.16 Invest NI Cantor Fitzgerald Benefit

Noted: The Committee noted a response from Invest NI indicating it cannot provide the estimated lifetime benefit of the potential Cantor Fitzgerald investment to the NI economy, as the information is commercially sensitive.

9.17 Invest NI Ukraine MoU

Noted: The Committee noted a response from Invest NI in respect of the Ukraine Memorandum of Understanding on economic co-operation.

9.18 Invest NI

Noted: The Committee noted a response from Invest NI in respect of the Antrim Technology Park, Mallusk Enterprise Park and the Mandeville development.

9.19 FODC Economic Development

The Committee considered a request from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council to brief the Committee on rural economic development.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to decline a briefing but to consider inviting the Council to give evidence if there is a Committee Stage for the Regional Balance Bill.

9.20 Local Growth Fund

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence confirming DfE has secured £13.292m capital funding from the Local Growth Fund.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on how the Local Growth Fund will be used and how it will support the Mandeville development.

9.21 Apprenticeship Opportunities and Funding

Noted: The Committee noted an exchange of correspondence between Slemish View Joinery and the Department, in respect of apprenticeship opportunities and funding.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and seek its commentary.

9.22 Cyber First

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence advising of CyberFirst Schools and Colleges programme delivered with Belfast Met and National Cyber Security Centre and the launch of TechFirst.

9.23 East-West Electricity Interconnection

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence in respect of the East-West Electricity Interconnection Policy Statement, which sets out principles of assessment for interconnection but not individual decisions including on funding regimes. Members also considered the CEPA report on interconnection and storage.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a briefing from the Department in respect of its Interconnection Policy.

9.24 Recoupling of SEM

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Taoiseach in respect of the recoupling of Single Electricity Market, indicating RoI support for GB rejoining the EU electricity market.

9.25 Electricity Guaranteed Service Standards

Noted: The Committee noted a Ministerial written statement in respect of the review of the Electricity Guaranteed Service Standards (EGSS), and the Overall Standards of Performance (OSP), advising that policy on severe weather payments will be developed.

9.26 Utility Regulator EGSS

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Utility Regulator providing a decision paper in respect of updates to the Electricity Guaranteed Service Standards (EGSS)

9.27 DfE: UR Bill

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of the responses to the call for evidence for the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill, pending the evidence sessions in respect of the Bill.

9.28 UR and CCNI MoU

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence providing a copy of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Utility Regulator and Consumer Council NI.

9.29 NIAUR 2024/25

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Finance providing the NIAUR 2024-25 annual reports and accounts.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy seeking an update on the provision of ARAs for all ALBs for 2024-25 and likely submission dates for 2025-26.

9.30 DfE REG Bill

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of the Renewable Electricity Generation Bill, providing a delegated powers memorandum.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the delegated powers memorandum to the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

9.31 Heat Networks Policy consultation

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of the forthcoming heat networks policy consultation for a specific framework for NI, including initial proposals on consumer protections. Delegated legislation will follow before 2027.

9.32 CMA Report

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Competition and Markets Authority report into home heating oil, pending the upcoming briefing on 9 September 2026.

9.33 CENI Report

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Community Energy NI report on Sharing the Benefits of Renewable Energy.

9.34 RSPB Report

Noted: The Committee noted a RSPB report entitled Powering Healthy Seas: Turning a Vision into Reality on offshore wind.

9.35 DfE PEL Bill

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the responses to the call for evidence on the Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill.

9.36 Mineral Development & Petroleum Production

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence providing the Mineral Development & Petroleum Production Annual Receipts and Payments Accounts 2024/25.

9.37 Steel nationalisation Bill

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of the Steel Nationalisation Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister asking why limited information has been provided to the Committee in respect of a number of LCMs.

9.38 Tourism and Inspection

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of tourism and inspection.

9.39 NI Tourism Invitation

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to attend Northern Ireland Tourism Conference.

9.40 Parental Bereavement Regulations

Noted: The Committee noted copies of the Parental Bereavement (Miscarriage) Regulations, previously approved by the Assembly.

9.41 UUEPC Research

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence advising that DfE and DoF have commissioned UUEPC to undertake research to examine barriers to public procurement for microbusinesses, SMEs, and Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprises.

9.42 DfE Investing Activity Report

Noted: The Committee noted the DfE Investing Activity Report for July 2026.

9.43 CfF May Outturn and Forecast
The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Finance in respect of the spending outturn and forecast for May 2026. DfE appears to have adjusted down its capital spend budget by around £17m.
Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on its capital spend budget adjustments.

David Honeyford joined the meeting at 10:47am.

9.44 Charities (Amendment) Bill
The Committee considered a call for evidence from the Committee for Communities in respect of the Charities (Amendment) Bill.
Agreed: The Committee agreed to provide a nil response.

9.45 Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill
The Committee considered a call for evidence from the Committee for Justice in respect of the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill.
Agreed: The Committee agreed to provide a nil response.

9.46 Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill
The Committee considered a pre-2nd stage call for evidence from the Committee for Communities in respect of the Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill.
Agreed: The Committee agreed to provide a nil response.

9.47 Housing (Amendment) Bill
The Committee considered a pre-2nd stage call for evidence from the Committee for Communities in respect of the Housing (Amendment) Bill.
Agreed: The Committee agreed to provide a nil response

9.48 Youth Assembly
Noted: The Committee noted the Youth Assembly newsletter for June 2026.

9.49 BSDL Financial Statements 2025-26
The Committee considered the Bedford Street Developments Limited (BSDL): Financial Statements 2025-26.

9.50 MRDE Financial Statements 2025-26
The Committee considered the McAleer & Rushe and Dunloe Ewart (MRDE) Limited: Financial Statements 2025-26.

9.51 Invest NI Annual Report and Accounts 2025-26
The Committee considered the Invest NI 2025-26 annual report and accounts.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Invest NI seeking clarification on the payment of a dividend, and a net change in cash and cash equivalent balance and changes to the reserves; and also to seek clarity on the relevant Private Finance Initiative and whether it will be subject to review and revision.

9.52 NI Screen Annual Report and Accounts 2025-26

Noted: The Committee noted the NI Screen 2025-26 annual report and accounts.

9.53 HSENI Annual Report and Accounts 2025-26

The Committee considered the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) Annual report and Accounts 2025-26.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Committee for Health in respect of the number of hospital patient fatalities.

9.54 General Consumer Council Annual Report and Accounts 2025-26

Noted: The Committee noted the General Consumer Council annual report and accounts 2025-26.

9.55 LRA Annual Report and Accounts 2025-26

Noted: The Committee noted the Labour Relations Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2025-26.

9.56 InterTradeIreland Annual Report and Accounts 2024

Noted: The Committee noted the annual report and accounts for InterTradeIreland 2024.

9.57 Ofcom Annual Report and Accounts 2025-26

Noted: The Committee noted the Office of Communications (Ofcom) annual report and accounts 2025-26.

9.58 CMA Annual Report and Accounts 2025-26

Noted: The Committee noted the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) annual report and accounts 2025 to 2026.

9.59 FCA Annual Report and Accounts 2025-26

Noted: The Committee noted the Financial Conduct Authority 2025-26 annual report and accounts.

9.60 HoL NISC - Industrial Accelerator Act

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to the Department of Business and Trade, in respect of the Industrial Accelerator Act.

9.61 DfE - Industrial Accelerator Act

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Industrial Accelerator Act, advising that the Department's interest relates to the proposed amendment to align construction products placed on the EU market with new low carbon and EU-origin objectives making such products, subject to additional sustainability, performance and information requirements.

9.62 HoL NISC - Cyber Resilience Act

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

9.63 HoL NISC - Cobalt and the Safety of Toys

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to the Department of Business and Trade, in respect of cobalt and the safety of toys.

9.64 Electric Vehicle Supply Equipment

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Department to the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee in respect of measuring systems for electric vehicle supply equipment and compressed gas dispensers, and electricity, gas and thermal energy meters.

9.65 Zero Rate of VAT for Domestic Electricity Bills

Noted: The Committee noted an exchange of correspondence between the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee and the Minister for the Economy in respect of the application of zero rate of VAT for domestic electricity bills to NI, form 1 October 2026. The Committee noted also that the Department is working to combine the NIRO electricity discount of £30 with the zero rating of VAT to deliver a discount to domestic customers of £50 in October 2026, subject to Treasury approval.

Padraig Delargy declared an interest as a Member of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee.

9.66 Late-night Transport Event

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation from Belfast Business Improvement Districts and the Night Czar, to a late-night transport event in the Long Gallery on Wednesday 16 September 2026.

9.67 Translink Service Cuts

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from a concerned individual to the Department for Infrastructure in respect of Translink service cuts.

9.68 NIFC Annual Conference for 2026

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence regarding the NI Fiscal Council's annual conference for 2026.

9.69 Royal Society of Chemistry Report

The Committee considered a copy of the Royal Society of Chemistry report on the impact of chemistry on the NI and UK economy, and a request to brief the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the report and decline a briefing due to legislative and forward work programme pressures.

9.70 Gas Maintenance and Inspection Regulations

Noted: The Committee noted a response from Clanmil Housing Association and the NI Federation of Housing Associations in respect of the call for views on the gas maintenance and inspection regulations, calling for legislation to allow landlords better access to ensure compliance with gas safety regulations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department in respect of measures to improve landlord access to ensure gas safety.

9.71 Apprentice Workplace Injury

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual in respect of an apprentice's workplace injury.

9.72 Claims Management Companies

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from British Insurers Brokers Association lobbying that the Department asks the UK Government to legislate to regulate Claims Management Companies in NI.

9.73 Employment Tribunals

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from a concerned individual to the Executive Office in respect of an employment tribunals FoI request and a request for a statement from the Committee in respect of a related petition.

10. Sustainable NI – Utility Regulator Bill

The following witness joined the meeting at 10:53am:

- Nichola Hughes, Executive Director, Sustainable NI

Key issues discussed included: the broader role of the Utility Regulator; fuel poverty considerations; review mechanisms; and engagement with other departments.

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

11. Draft Forward Work Programme

Agreed: The Committee agreed to begin its meeting of 9 September 2026 at 9am in order to receive the rescheduled pre-second stage briefing on the Regional Balance Bill, subject to confirmation of the timing of 2nd Stage.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule Departmental briefings in respect of the Sporting Events Bill LCM; Commercial Payments Bill LCM; DfE interconnection policy; and the budget.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold an external Committee meeting at AMIC on 7 October 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reschedule a briefing from the Department, QUB, Ulster University and the Open University in respect of Higher Education funding to 7 October 2026.

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

Proceedings were suspended at 11:15am
Proceedings resumed at 11:44am

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 11:44am

12. Consumer Council NI - Utility Regulator Bill

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 11:45am:
- Noyona Chunder, Chief Executive, CCNI; and
- Raymond Gormley, Head of Energy, CCNI.

Key issues discussed included: the definition of the energy sector; the Memorandum of Understanding with the Utility Regulator; needs of consumers; and the role of the Consumer Council NI in energy transition and reform.

Kate Nicholl left the meeting at 12:02pm
The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.
The witnesses left the meeting at 12:05pm.

13. Any other business

Padraig Delargy noted that Queen's University Belfast had reportedly not engaged with Irish language bodies in respect of Irish language signage

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to QUB seeking: an update on the relevant engagement; an explanation for the lack of reported engagement: and for details of the next steps.

There was no other business.

14. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next scheduled Economy Committee meeting will begin on Wednesday 9 September 2026 at 9:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 12:07pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

9 September 2026