



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 5th March 2025**

**Meeting Location: The Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Stormont.**

**Present:** Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Emma Sheerin MLA

**Present via video conferencing:**

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

**Apologies:** Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

**In Attendance:** Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Anthea Matthews (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)  
Stuart Gilmour (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in public session at 10:03am.

## **1. Apologies**

Apologies were as indicated above.

## **2. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

## **3. Chairperson's Business**

### **3.1 Informal meeting – Utility Regulator**

The Chairperson reminded Members that as previously agreed, he had met informally with the Utility Regulator on Tuesday 4 March 2025 and that a summary note of the informal meeting had been circulated.

The Chairperson advised that there appeared to be no mechanism by which compensation might be paid to NIE Networks Ltd customers who had lost connection during Storm Éowyn.

## **4. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 26 February 2025.

## **5. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

## **6. Free the Night – Supporting the Night Time Economy – oral evidence session**

The following witnesses from Free the Night joined the meeting at 10:07am:

- Boyd Sleator, Co-Founder, Free the Night; and
- Holly Lester, Co-Founder, Free the Night.

Key issues discussed included: a cross-departmental taskforce to support the night-time economy; licensing issues; safe spaces; the need for affordable, reliable public transport; supporting public transport costs through ticket levies; addressing dereliction through developing non-commercial culturally viable spaces; Belfast Culture Night; best practice in other cities; and anti-social issues and the impact on communities.

Sinéad McLaughlin left the meeting at 11:04am.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 11:16am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking its commentary on: the need for a cross-departmental taskforce to support the night-time economy; a ticket levy to fund public transport in the evenings; and the development of non-commercial cultural spaces.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to Free the Night seeking further information on: The Alliance After Dark.

## **7. Aerospace, Defence, Security and Space (ADS) Group – Industry support – oral evidence session**

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 11:18am:

- Alan Henning, Director of Operations, Collins Aerospace & ADS NI Council Chairperson;
- Nigel MacVean, Managing Director, Thales Integrated Airspace Protection Systems;
- Kevin McNamee, Chief Executive Officer, Denroy Plastics;
- Sam Turner, Chief Executive Officer, Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre (AMIC); and
- Leslie Orr, Director, ADS NI.

Key issues discussed included: the need for an aerospace strategy and long-term investment; reform of the apprenticeship levy; the need for 5-6 PfG clusters; the cost of doing business and the impact of the increased National Minimum Wage and increased Employers National Insurance contributions; R&D tax incentives; gender balance in the industry; decarbonisation; Invest NI support; QUB underwriting of AMIC; the need for a High Value Manufacturing Catapult centre; electricity grid connection and water infrastructure issues.

The Chairperson recorded his disappointment that other Members had made clearly erroneous statements in respect of a leading NI defence manufacturer which was responsible for generating a considerable number of jobs and investment in NI.

The Chairperson recorded his view that defence manufacturers should be supported by politicians, given their positive impact on the economy and employment for all sections of the community.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 12:11pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking commentary on: the absence of a High Value Manufacturing Catapult centre in NI; whether QUB's underwriting of AMIC will be adversely affected by the reported cuts to QUB's funding allocation in the draft 2025-26 budget; Invest NI's legacy employment targets which have been superseded by automation; and infrastructure connection issues.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to visit Collins Aerospace, Kilkeel.

## **8. Correspondence**

### **8.1 Index**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

### **8.2 Economy Minister – joint Concurrent**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the Economy Minister's acceptance of the Committee's invitation to attend a joint concurrent Ministerial meeting on 14 May 2025, subject to Minister Givan's acceptance.

### **8.3 Education Minister**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Education, indicating that he was unable to attend the joint concurrent meeting on 14 May 2025.

### **8.4 Artificial Intelligence in public services**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Department of Finance response on the use of Artificial Intelligence in public services – indicating that small scale proof of value projects are underway.

### **8.5 NICS Sickness Absence**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the Quarterly Sickness Absence statistics for the Northern Ireland Civil Service for October to December 2024.

### **8.6 Funding Employer National Insurance costs**

**Noted:** The Committee noted information from the Committee for Finance on the £200m cost of Employer National Insurance costs for the NICS and relevant ALBs and an indication that Barnett consequentials will likely cover only three quarters of this cost.

### **8.7 Agriculture Bill - Call for Evidence**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a call for evidence from the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for the Agriculture Bill.

### **8.8 RHI Reports**

**Noted:** The Committee noted that the Public Accounts Committee has released 2 NIAO RHI reports for scrutiny by other committees.

### **8.9 ESR Report**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the 33rd Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules – the ESR has provided no comment on: S.R. 2025/14: The Companies (Disqualification Orders) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and S.R. 2025/20: The Further Education (Student Support) (Eligibility) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

### **8.10 Investment Report.**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the ISNI Investment Activity Report for February 2025.

### **8.11 Invitation - Union Learning Conference**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an invitation to Members to attend the annual Union Learning Conference on: 9.30am-1.30pm Thursday 27 March 2025, at The Mac, Belfast.

### **8.12 Employment Tribunals**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of restricted correspondence relating to an employment tribunal.

## **9. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to proceed with the joint concurrent meeting with the Education Committee on 14 May 2025 hearing evidence from DE and DfE officials but without Ministers attending.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek an urgent evidence session from the Department for the Economy on 12 March 2025 on the way forward for compensation payments to NIE Networks Ltd customers who had lost electricity grid connection during Storm Éowyn.

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

## **10. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

## **11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting**

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 12 March 2025 at 10:30am in the Eikon Centre, Maze Long Kesh, Lisburn.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:13pm.

**Phillip Brett MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**12 March 2025**