



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 22 April 2026

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Ms Diane Forsythe (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Present via video conferencing:

Mr Declan Kearney MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Apologies:

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

In Attendance:

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Katie McMaster (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Sarah Dowd (Clerical Officer)

Aidan Stennett (Research Officer) – item 7 only

Jonathan Redpath (Senior Assistant Bill clerk – Items 8 and 9 only)

The meeting commenced in open session at 10:01am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

Phillip Brett declared an interest in respect of being a member of Cloughfern Credit Union.

Diana Armstrong declared an interest in respect of being a member of Irvinestown Credit Union.

Padraig Delargy declared an interest in respect of being a member of Derry Credit Union.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Informal Meeting – NIAO

The Chairperson reminded Members that as previously agreed, he had met informally with the Comptroller and Auditor General on 21 April 2026 to discuss the NIAO Public Reporting Programme.

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

3.2 Informal Meeting – US Consul

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee had received an invitation to meet informally with the US Consul General and guests to discuss economy related matters.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content to undertake the informal meeting.

Sinead McLaughlin joined the meeting at 10:02am

3.3 Informal Meeting – Canadian High Commission

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee had received an invitation to meet informally with a delegation from the Canadian High Commission to discuss economy related matters.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content to undertake the informal meeting.

3.4 Ulster University Redundancies

The Chairperson referred Members to recent media coverage in respect of 450 potential job losses at Ulster University and concerns around the plans for expansion at the Magee Campus.

Padraig Delargy declared an interest in respect of being a former PGCE student at Ulster University and in respect of a family member formerly being a member of UU staff.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an oral and written briefing from the Department and Ulster University in respect of: the background to the reported prospective redundancies; the impact on City and Growth Deals including Magee expansion; and how the Department is to resolve the budget issues which have precipitated the proposed redundancies.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to seek an oral and written briefing from the University and College Union (UCU) in respect of the above.

Kate Nicholl joined the meeting at 10:06am

3.5 Barrier Busting Taskforce

The Chairperson referred Members to a recent Assembly Written Question (ref: AQW 43295) where the Minister referred to the broadband and mobile access Barrier Busting Taskforce which is set to wind-up. The Minister indicated that she is going to ask relevant stakeholders to pursue the outstanding recommendations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking details of the outstanding broadband connectivity and mobile access issues and the timeline for their resolution.

3.6 Defence Spending

The Chairperson referred Members to recent media coverage in respect of a substantial investment in the Northern Ireland defence manufacturing industry.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking information as to how the £50m investment is to be allocated, in particular will it be allocated directly from HM Government or via the Department and/or Invest NI.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the revised minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 25 March 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 15 April 2026.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Credit Union Consultation Feedback – Departmental evidence

The following officials joined the meeting at 10:08am:

- Colin Jack, Director, Business and Employment Regulation Division, DfE;
- Laurence Rogers, Head of Better Business Branch, DfE; and
- Chris Denvir, Credit Union Policy Lead, DfE.

Proceedings were reported by Hansard.

Kate Nicholl declared an interest in respect of being a member of a Credit Union. Sinead McLaughlin declared an interest in respect of being a member of the Derry Credit Union.

Key issues discussed included: the proposed Credit Union Service Organisation; the proposed Credit Union Advisory Group; loan to asset ratios and metrics for success; financial inclusion and access to credit; pooling of credit risk; social investment; cyber security; loan referrals, SME lending; and cross-departmental working in support of credit union promotion and reform.

Members recorded their particular thanks to officials for their clear and well thought-out explanation of important policy matters.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 10:43am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department: welcoming the anticipated legislation; recognising the diversity of the sector; and indicating that supports will be required to ensure financial inclusion and to manage risk while maintaining the local footprint and nature of credit unions.

7. Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill - Assembly Research

Aidan Stennett joined the meeting at 10:44am

The Committee noted the Assembly Research paper on the Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill: Key Considerations.

The Chairperson thanked Aidan for his briefing.
Aidan left the meeting at 10:53am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to continue in closed session at 10:53am.

8. Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill – Bill Office Advice

Jonathan Redpath joined the meeting at 10:53am.

Jonathan provided advice in respect of the anticipated Committee Stage of the Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed, subject to the passage of the Bill at 2nd Stage, to endorse: the anticipated Committee Stage timeline; the Citizen Space questionnaire; the stakeholder mailing list; the call for evidence letter; and a related newspaper advertisement.

9. Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill – Bill Office Advice

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

The Chairperson thanked Jonathan for his briefings.
Jonathan Redpath left the meeting at 11:07am

Agreed: The Committee agreed, subject to the passage of the Bill at 2nd Stage, to endorse: the anticipated Committee Stage timeline; the Citizen Space questionnaire; the stakeholder mailing list and the call for evidence letter; a related newspaper advertisement; and a press release covering the anticipated Committee Stages of both Bills.

Proceedings were suspended at 11:07am
Proceedings resumed in open session at 11:16am

10. Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill – Departmental Evidence

The following officials joined the meeting at 11:17am:

- Anne-Maire McConn, Head of Energy Strategy and Corporate Services, DfE;
and
- Paul Skillen, Head of Energy Bill Team, DfE.

Proceedings were reported by Hansard.

Key issues discussed included: the vires of the Utility Regulator and the Climate Change Act and Energy Strategy; the need for further regulatory powers in subsequent legislation and related engagement forums; DfE resources to develop legislation; interconnection policy; the scope of the Bill; and the scope of the Committee's scrutiny.

Diane Forsythe left the meeting at 11:37am.
The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.
The officials left the meeting at 11:39am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the development of policy in respect of: interconnection; long term storage; and grid connectivity.

11. Correspondence

11.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

11.2 Social Enterprise Consultation

Noted: The Committee noted Ministerial correspondence providing a summary of consultation responses on the definition of a social enterprise in NI.

11.3 Flood Protection and Recovery Framework

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of the development of a business flood protection and recovery framework.

11.4 DSA Eligibility

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the costs of extending Disability Support Allowance eligibility to include resits.

11.5 Skills Council

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the review of the Skills Council.

11.6 Learning Participation Report

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Learning Participation report providing figures on achievement for Level 2 and Level 3 courses in Further Education colleges from 2020/21 to 2024/25.

11.7 Further Education: Fit for the Future Programme

Noted: The Committee noted Ministerial correspondence, providing information on the Further Education: Fit for the Future programme, which is to be delivered over the next 18 months.

11.8 Offshore Renewable Development

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence providing further information on offshore renewable development.

11.9 Utility Regulator - Renewable Generation

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Utility Regulator in respect of renewable generation, advising that NI dispatch down levels reduced from 25.5% in 2024 to 19.0% in 2025.

11.10 Utility Regulator - Development of Energy Cost Measures

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Utility Regulator providing further information on the engagement between the Utility Regulator and the Department regarding the development of energy cost measures.

11.11 Tourism Ireland - Social Media Influencers

Noted: The Committee noted a response from Tourism Ireland, providing further information on the use of social media influencers.

11.12 CMA Review Domestic Heating Oil

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), in respect of the CMA's review of the domestic heating oil market.

11.13 Toy Safety toys: cobalt

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to the Minister for Employment Rights and Consumer Protection in respect of the safety of toys, as regards cobalt.

11.14 Harmonised Rules on AI

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the House of invitation Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to the Minister for AI and Online Safety in respect of simplification of the implementation of harmonised rules on artificial intelligence (Digital Omnibus on AI).

11.15 CAERA Invitation

The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, inviting the Committee for the Economy to take part in a round table informal discussion in relation to the issues of the cost, supply and storage of fuel and fertiliser.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to accept the invitation for 5 May 2026 in Parliament Buildings.

11.16 US Consulate

Noted: The Committee noted a request from the US Consulate for the Committee to attend an informal meeting and lunch.

11.17 PAC - Energy Matters

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Public Accounts Committee, providing a copy of previously considered correspondence on energy matters.

11.18 CENI

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from Community Energy Northern Ireland, providing further information on community energy developments in NI.

11.19 Tribunal Issue

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual to on NI employment tribunal reform and the Employment Rights Bill.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to include briefings in its forward work programme from the Department, University of Ulster and the University and Colleges Union (UCU) in respect of reported prospective redundancies at UU.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold the date for an informal stakeholder event on the Employment Rights Bill at 6-9pm on Wednesday 30 September 2026 in Parliament Buildings.

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 29 April 2026 at 10:00am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 11:49am.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

29 April 2026