



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 22 October 2025

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings

Present: Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA
Ms Kate Nicholl MLA
Ms Emma Sheerin MLA

Present by video-conferencing:

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA
Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
Mr David Honeyford MLA
Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Apologies: Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

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

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Kyle Lawlor (Clerical Officer)

Angela Kelly (Examiner of Statutory Rules) – Item 7 only

The meeting commenced in public session at 9:20am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

There was no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Energy Strategy

David Honeyford declared an interest in respect of being a member of the Public Accounts Committee.

The Deputy Chairperson reminded Members that the Northern Ireland Audit Office had launched its report on the Department's Energy Strategy and that the C&AG was to brief the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) – which has primacy on this issue – on Thursday 23 October 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the Terms of Reference and timeline for its scheduled review of the Energy Strategy.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 15 October 2025.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Insolvency (Amendment) Bill – Insolvency Practitioners Association

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 9:23am:

- Antoinette Thorpe, Director, Insolvency Practitioners Association; and
- Lyn Green, Director of Regulation & Policy, Insolvency Practitioners Association.

The evidence session was reported by Hansard.

Padraig Delargy joined the meeting at 9:35am.

Kate Nicholl joined the meeting at 9:45am.

Key issues discussed included: streamlining and costs of insolvency measures; use of digital technology and the compliance framework; use of the statement of affairs; the assignment of claims to third parties; the deemed consent procedure; ongoing review of insolvency rules in England and Wales; practice directions relating to the treatment of unsecured debts; and the need for the training of practitioners following the passage of the Bill.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 10:01am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Insolvency Practitioner Association seeking sight of the latest Insolvency Service update on the insolvency rules in England and Wales.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to continue proceedings in closed session at 10:02am.

7. Insolvency (Amendment) Bill – ESR guidance

Angela Kelly, the Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR) joined the meeting at 10:02am.

Angela advised the Committee on the delegated powers of the Insolvency (Amendment) Bill.

The Chairperson thanked Angela for her briefing.

Angela Kelly left the meeting at 10:13am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department in respect of draft affirmative resolution applying to all provisions in Clause 119(4) and negative resolution applying to Schedule 4.

Proceedings continued in public session from 10:14am.

8. DfE – Apprenticeship Action Plan – oral and written evidence

The following officials joined the meeting at 10:15am:

- Kathryn McCamley, Deputy Director, Apprenticeships, Careers and Vocational Education Division, DfE;
- Erin Savage, Head of Apprenticeship Policy and Strategic Engagement, DfE; and
- Michael Harris, Head of Apprenticeships Delivery and Performance, DfE.

Key issues discussed included: Apprenticeship 2025 increase in training organisations and cost allocations; the need for a one-stop shop application process; SME support and the apprenticeship navigator pilot; sectoral action plan linkage; the apprenticeship levy; the Inclusion Challenge pilot projects for economically deprived areas; a Shared Island project application; launch of an all-island Higher Level Apprenticeship; entry qualifications and apprentice educational development; and associated insurance costs

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 11:19am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department;

- seeking further information on apprenticeship levy contributions in England, Wales and Scotland compared to actual apprenticeship spending;
- seeking further information on how the Department is supporting apprenticeships, career route development and the promotion of trade and green skills in the NI public sector;
- calling for the development of targets for apprenticeship uptake in deprived areas;
- calling for better linkage with the sectoral action plans; and

- indicating support for a one-stop apprenticeship application process, expressing disappointment and confusion at the lack of action to-date; and seeking information on what consideration had been given to its development.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to seek an oral and written evidence session from the Department on the Skills Action Plan.

9. Delegated Legislation - The Insolvency Practitioner Regulations SL1

The Committee considered the proposed statutory rule: Insolvency Practitioners (Recognised Professional Bodies) (Revocation of Recognition) (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025.

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

10. Correspondence

10.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

10.2 Project Gigabit

The Committee considered Ministerial correspondence in respect of Project Gigabit. The Committee noted that the contract has not been awarded and that owing to value for money considerations approximately 1500 premises, originally in the scope of the intervention area, will not be included at this stage.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department expressing disappointment and seeking clarity on the location etc. 1500 premises which will not be included at this stage of Project Gigabit.

10.3 UU Multi-campus Costs

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of UU: multi-campus costs.

10.4 UU Inclusion issues

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the reported inclusion issues at UU Magee.

10.5 DfE/DE Cross-Departmental working

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of DfE/DE cross-Departmental working indicating that the Ministerial Group will not meet until 24 November 2025.

10.6 LEP Spending

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of Local Economic Partnerships' revised spending allocations.

10.7 Energy Efficiency Capital Grant Scheme

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of the review of the Energy Efficiency Capital Grant Scheme.

Jonathan Buckley recorded concerns in respect of the lack of clarity provided regarding the Scheme's status.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the timescale for the production of the review report on the Scheme.

10.8 Evri Euro Hub

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Evri Euro Hub investment at Mallusk.

10.9 Invest NI Review

The Committee considered a Ministerial written statement, including a review of Invest NI support since 2023. The statement advised that the investments reviewed did not support arms manufacture or their components for supply to Israel.

Members expressed differing views on trading with Israel and commented in respect of the Minister's statement regarding her instruction to the Department for the Economy to not engage in UK Government trade negotiations with Israel.

Jonathan Buckley and the Gary Middleton indicated that they were disturbed by the Minister's statement and argued that it was inconsistent with the treatment of other

countries; was an ill-advised act of economic self-sabotage; and was politically motivated.

Emma Sheerin and Pádraig Delargy endorsed the Minister's approach and asserted that it was ethical, reasonable and proportionate given recent significant developments in the region.

Kate Nicholl and David Honeyford felt that the absence of an international strategy from TEO to ensure an ethical consistency of approach regarding trading with overseas partners was lacking.

Diana Armstrong recorded her concern that as international trade is a reserved matter, it was likely outside of the Minister's competence to instruct her officials in respect of UK Government trade negotiations.

Sinead McLaughlin suggested that the discussion at the Committee was confused and that different issues had been conflated.

The Deputy Chairperson put the following motion to the Committee:

"That the Committee writes to the Minister seeking clarity as to whether, as international trade is a reserved matter, it was outside of her competence as Minister for the Economy to instruct officials in respect of engagement with UK Government trade negotiations with the State of Israel and to also seek clarity as to whether those instructions required Executive approval, the absence of which placed the Minister in breach of the Ministerial Code."

The Committee divided:

8 votes were recorded.

Ayes: Diana Armstrong; Jonathan Buckley; David Honeyford; Gary Middleton; Kate Nicholl

Noes: Pádraig Delargy; Sinead McLaughlin; Emma Sheerin

Abstentions: None

The motion was passed.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to TEO commenting on the absence of an international relations strategy and seeking clarity as to when it will be produced.

10.10 Partnership Agreements

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence providing copies of partnership agreements laid by DfE for the Open University, St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College.

10.11 MRDE financial statements

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence providing the McAleer, Rushe and Dunlow Ewart (MRDE) Ltd Director's report and financial statements 2024-25.

10.12 BSDL financial statements

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence providing the Bedford Street Developments Ltd (BSDL) Director's report and financial statements 2024-25.

10.13 Invest NI ARA

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of Invest NI's Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25, pending a scheduled briefing on 3 December 2025. Members noted also that the ARA advised that a number of the departing Invest NI directors received departure payments of around £200k each.

10.14 Foyle Port: AI Growth Zone

Gary Middleton declared an interest in respect of his wife being a Foyle Port Commissioner.

The Committee considered a response from the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), in respect of Foyle Port's AI Growth Zone application.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to Foyle Port.

10.15 Workplace Saving Schemes

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Department for Communities in respect of Workplace Saving Schemes. DfC co-sponsors the NI Financial Wellbeing Delivery Plan with the Money and Pensions Service (MaPS).

10.16 Pay Transparency Directive

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Department for Communities indicating that no progress had been made on the Pay Transparency Directive and that the lead department had not been identified.

10.17 Tourism NI – Letter of Comfort

The Committee considered correspondence from the Business Office in respect of a Departmental Minute relating to a letter of comfort for Tourism Northern Ireland pensions. This minute was laid, withdrawn and re-laid as correct procedures were not initially followed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department advising that it had no objections to the letter of comfort.

10.18 AERC response

Gary Middleton declared an interest in respect of being a Member of the Assembly Executive Review Committee (AERC).

Noted: The Committee noted a memo from the Assembly Executive Review Committee (AERC), including a response from the Department, in respect of the AERC inquiry into the scrutiny of cross-cutting Executive strategies.

10.19 Kilroot Power Station

The Committee considered a response from EP UK Investments in respect of the Committee's request for an evidence session on Kilroot Power Station. Owing to legal proceedings, EP UK Investments declined to provide evidence at this time. Members noted that EP UK Investment referred to "a simple modification to the code dealing with settlement of balancing market payments which will, if implemented,

entirely remove the risk of increased costs to consumers which arise as a result of EPNIE's gas turbines running in excess of their environmental permitted hours.”

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Utility Regulator seeking clarity on the ‘simple modification to the code’.

10.20 NFDA – Car Registrations

The Committee considered a request from the National Franchise Dealers Association (NFDA) to brief the Committee on car registration issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule an oral and written evidence session from NFDA on 19 November 2025.

10.21 Electricity Safety First

The Committee considered an invitation from Electricity Safety First to attend a drop in event taking place on Monday 3 November, in room 115.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Members would advise Electricity Safety First individually if they were able to attend.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme including a potential Committee visit to Disability Support Service providers and an evidence session on AI in Northern Ireland.

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue a call for evidence letter and the list of stakeholders to which it will be issued for the Committee Stage of the RHI (Closure of Non-Domestic Scheme) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to launch the call for evidence Citizen Space survey for the Committee Stage of the RHI (Closure of Non-Domestic Scheme) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the publication of the call for evidence newspaper advertisement and press release, for the Committee Stage of the RHI (Closure of Non-Domestic Scheme) Bill.

12. Any Other Business

12.1 Insolvency Practitioner evidence

Agreed: The Committee agreed to publish a further written submission from the Insolvency Practitioners Association in respect of the Insolvency (Amendment) Bill.

12.2 Sectoral Action Plans

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an update from the Department on its Sectoral Action Plans.

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 11:57am

13. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 5 November 2025 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Stormont.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 11:57am.

Gary Middleton, MLA

Deputy Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

12 November 2025