



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Tuesday 10 March 2026

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Ms Diane Forsythe (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Mr Declan Kearney MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Apologies:

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

In Attendance:

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Claire Milliken (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 9:32am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's business.

4. Draft Budget – Department for the Economy – oral and written evidence

The following officials joined the meeting at 9:33am:

- Ian Snowden, Permanent Secretary, DfE:
- Mark Lee, Acting Deputy Secretary for Economic Policy, DfE:
- Louise Watson, Acting Deputy Secretary of Skills and Education, DfE; and
- Sharon Hetherington, Finance Director, DfE.

Declan Kearney joined the meeting at 9:38am.

Jonathan Buckley joined the meeting at 9:44am.

Key issues discussed included: the DfE budget for resource and capital; pay pressures; demand pressures; delays to timeframes; Departmental and Arms Length Bodies efficiencies; possible caps on apprenticeships, Higher Education and skills; a business plan for £81m resource AME Barnett consequential for energy savings projects; HE expansion and student fee levels; Shared Island/Peace Plus projects; DfE staffing model, natural wastage (6%), silo working, use of AI and cultural issues; ALB salaries; FE college autonomy; capital pressures linked to A5; FTC and support for Magee expansion; and the Department's disclaimed accounts.

Sinead McLaughlin left the meeting at 10:33am.

David Honeyford left the meeting at 10:53am.

Padraig Delargy left the meeting at 10:59am.

The Committee lost its decision-making quorum.

Declan Kearney left the meeting at 11:03am.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 11:03am.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

18 March 2026