



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 10th September 2025

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Ms Emma Sheerin MLA

Apologies:

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

In Attendance:

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Kyle Lawlor (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in public session at 10:30am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

Diana Armstrong declared an interest in that she had visited a Dalriada mining facility.

Jonathan Buckley and Padraig Delargy declared interests indicating that they were repaying student loans.

David Honeyford declared an interest in that his children had previously received student loans.

Emma Sheerin joined the meeting at 10:31am.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Informal meeting – SSE Clean Energy Investment

The Chairperson advised Members that, as agreed, he had met informally with representatives from SSE Plc and that a summary note of the informal meeting would be circulated.

3.2 Fols Summer Recess

The Chairperson advised Members that a Freedom of Information request was received by the Committee during summer recess and had been responded to within the statutory timescales.

3.3 Insolvency (Amendment) Bill

The Chairperson advised Members that the Assembly had agreed to extend the Committee Stage of the Insolvency (Amendment) Bill until 12 December 2025. The

Chairperson further advised that the Department had lately provided the delegated powers memorandum, the Keeling schedule and the equality screening document, which will be made available to Members shortly.

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

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 2 July 2025.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. SR 140/2025 Public Interest Notice Disclosure Order

The Committee considered a statutory rule laid by the Department: The Public Interest Disclosure (Prescribed Persons) (Amendment No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the following motion

“That the Committee for the Economy has considered the statutory rule: SR 140/2025 The Public Interest Disclosure (Prescribed Persons) (Amendment No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025 and subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, has no objection to the rule”

7. SL1 Student Fees

The Committee considered the proposed statutory rule: The Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2025

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

8. Correspondence

8.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

8.2 HE Financial Needs Assessment

Noted: The Committee noted Ministerial correspondence advising that a Financial Needs Assessment of the NI universities for 2025-30 was undertaken as part of the Spending Review.

8.3 Widening Participation in HE

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence which advised that a public consultation is to be launched on widening participation into Higher Education.

8.4 HE Grant Allocation

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence which advised of a flat cash allocation for HE in 2025-26.

Members recorded their concerns that a Terms of Reference and the composition of the relevant panel had yet to be determined for the review of HE Funding.

8.5 HE Funding

The Committee considered a response from QUB on its applications and enrolments from RoI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Department stressing the importance of student mobility; noting the imbalance in NI/RoI enrolments; and seeking an update on the way forward with the government of the RoI in respect of student enrolments from that jurisdiction in Northern Ireland.

8.6 UCAS HE Data 2025

Noted: The Committee noted UCAS student HE application data for 2025.

8.7 Post-Graduate Tuition Fees

The Committee considered Departmental notice of a consultation on the Northern Ireland Postgraduate Tuition Fee Loan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek evidence from the Department on the feedback from the consultation.

8.8 Apprenticeship Action Plan

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence in respect of the launch of the Apprenticeship Action Plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek evidence from the Department on the Apprenticeship Action Plan.

8.9 PAC Skills Report

Padraig Delargy and David Honeyford declared interests in that they are members of the Public Accounts Committee.

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Finance including the Memorandum of Response from DE/DfE on the PAC report into Developing the Skills for NI's Future.

8.10 Research: Qualifications NI/Rol

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental research bulletin on qualifications in NI and Rol and economic inactivity.

8.11 Labour Relations Agency ARA

Noted: The Committee noted the Labour Relations Agency Annual Report And Accounts for 2024-25; Corporate Plan 2025-29 and Business Plan 2025-26.

8.12 APG Report

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from Kate Nicholl MLA including a copy of the APG report on the need for social care skills.

8.13 Closure of RHI Scheme

The Committee considered Ministerial correspondence indicating that a paper on legislation for the closure of the RHI scheme had been submitted to the Executive.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek evidence from the Department on RHI closure following the agreement of the way forward by the Executive.

Padraig Delargy left the meeting at 10:48am.

8.14 Energy Strategy

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence indicating that the Energy Strategy is its plan for developing renewables, grid capacity and long-term storage.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department indicating that the Energy Strategy does not provide policy or planning clarity in respect of renewables, grid interconnectivity, long-term storage etc. and calling for clarity in order to provide certainty for business investment and community benefits.

8.15 Renewable Planning Issues

The Committee considered a response from the Department for Infrastructure in respect of the consultation on the review of regional strategic planning policy on renewables etc. in 2023 which had reportedly not yet been considered by the Executive.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the response from the Department for Infrastructure with the Committee for Infrastructure.

8.16 Hydrogen Hubs Projects

The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Department of Finance in respect of the Hydrogen Hubs Projects (HyTech NI) involving QUB/UU and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council at the ECOS centre Ballymena.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Invest NI seeking clarity on support for hydrogen projects, how this is to be allocated and the related geographic spread.

Padraig Delargy returned to the meeting at 10:50am.

8.17 Foyle Port

The Committee considered Foyle Port's response in respect of offshore renewable energy development.

Gary Middleton declared an interest in that his wife is a Foyle Port Commissioner.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Committee for Infrastructure.

8.18 Electricity Guaranteed Standards of Service

The Committee considered a Ministerial written statement on Electricity Guaranteed Standards of Service (GSS) (including when providers may apply for an exemption in case of severe weather events) including reference to a Utility Regulator consultation at Halloween with revised draft regulations likely available by March 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an oral briefing from the Utility Regulator on the consultation feedback.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to NIE in respect of its tree-cutting programme – seeking ToRs and clarity as to how communities will be consulted and offering liaison in this regard through local MLAs.

8.19 NIAUR 2024-25 ARA

Noted: The Committee noted the NIAUR (Utility Regulator) 2024-25 Annual Report and Accounts.

8.20 Research: Decarbonisation

The Committee considered a Departmental research bulletin on decarbonisation and the circular economy – comparing territorial per capita CO₂ emissions for NI (which are falling) with a broader consumption based measure (carbon footprint which includes imports) which is levelling off.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek an update on the development of the circular economy strategy.

8.21 Research: Business Challenges NI

The Committee considered Departmental research bulletins in respect of business challenges and opportunities in NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance seeking an update on the publication of statistics showing the extent of public sector contracting to SMEs, microbusinesses and social enterprises and the location of the relevant businesses.

8.22 Car Registration Issues

The Committee considered a response from the Secretary of State NI to the Committee's queries in respect of car registration issues and the Windsor Framework.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to the National Franchise Dealers Association and seek its commentary.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the SoS NI seeking a timeline for the alignment measures set out in his response.

8.23 FSB - Windsor Framework - SMEs

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Federation of Small Businesses in respect of the sectoral impact of the Windsor Framework on small businesses.

8.24 OIM – Windsor Framework - SMEs

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Office for the Internal Market (OIM) arguing that the FSB report on the Windsor Framework was weighted towards businesses who were experiencing difficulties with the Framework.

8.25 OIM -UK Internal Market Act

The Committee considered a response from UKG in respect of the OIM review of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the OIM and ask it to investigate the impact of Windsor Framework regulatory change and the real world impact for SMEs trading in NI.

8.26 SoS NI - Windsor Framework - SMEs

The Committee considered a response from SoS NI in respect of the FSB report on Windsor Framework.

Jonathan Buckley recorded concerns in respect of the impact of the Windsor Framework on businesses in NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite Lord Murphy, the author of the report on the independent review of the Windsor Framework, to give oral evidence to the Committee.

8.27 HoL NI Scrutiny Committee - Windsor Framework

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the HoL NI Scrutiny Committee indicating that it is to produce a report on strengthening NI's voice in the Windsor Framework process.

8.28 HoL NI Scrutiny Committee - Digital Product Specifications

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the HoL NI Scrutiny Committee to the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) seeking clarity on the implications for potential divergence for digital product specifications.

8.29 HoL NI Scrutiny Committee - Critical Minerals Strategy

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the HoL NI Scrutiny Committee to DBT indicating that the UKG is to develop a new Critical Minerals Strategy.

8.30 HoL NI Scrutiny Committee – Geographical Indications

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the HoL NI Scrutiny Committee to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) in respect of EU regulations on the protection of geographical indications for craft and industrial products.

8.31 KME Steelworks Ltd

The Committee considered forwarded correspondence from KME Steelworks Ltd in respect of reported imbalances created by EU tariffs in NI, particularly on aluminium sheet raw material which favours GB suppliers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity in respect of EU tariffs on aluminium sheet raw material.

8.32 SoS NI - CLP

Noted: The Committee noted forwarded correspondence from the SoS NI indicating that a consultation has been launched including extending EU rules on the classification, labelling and packaging (CLP) of substances and mixtures to the rest of the UK.

8.33 Road Haulage Association

The Committee considered a request from the Road Haulage Association to brief the Committee on behalf of haulers, logistics companies and coach operators in NI, in respect of the new Windsor Framework customs arrangements.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule oral evidence with the Road Haulage Association.

8.34 CMA ARA 2024-25

The Committee considered the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) Annual Report and Accounts 2024 to 2025 including reference to Northern Ireland in respect of branding in healthcare settings (baby formula) and mineral product supply chains.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for Health in respect of the response from Department of Health on branding in healthcare settings.

8.35 Creative Industries Taskforce

The Committee considered a response from DCMS (the Department for Culture, Media and Sports) in respect of the UKG's Creative Industries Taskforce and the impact of AI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Deluxe Group.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on Culture and Creative Industries inter-ministerial group.

8.36 NI Screen ARA 2024-25

Noted: The Committee noted the Northern Ireland Screen: Annual Report And Accounts 2024-25.

8.37 DfE Consultation on Credit Unions.

Sinead McLaughlin, Padraig Delargy, Philip Brett, Diana Armstrong made declarations of interest in respect of being members of credit unions.

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for Finance to the Minister for the Economy in respect of the DfE consultation on credit unions.

8.38 Research: Social Enterprises

The Committee considered a written Ministerial statement including a social enterprise research report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking information on the next steps for the report's recommendations.

8.39 Presbyterian Mutual Society Losses

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence providing an update on the final Presbyterian Mutual Society losses of £62.1m.

8.40 NIFC: Spending Review

Noted: The Committee noted forwarded correspondence from the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council giving its assessment of the implications of the Spending Review for the Executive.

8.41 NIFC: Budget Databank

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council providing a link to its databank showing spending by the Department for the previous 4 year period.

8.42 Budgets: DoF Guidance

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of Department of Finance guidance to departments on the Budget for resource for 2026/27-2028/29 and capital for 2026-27 to 2029-30.

8.43 ISNI Capital Reports

Noted: The Committee noted ISNI capital investment activity reports for DfE for July and August 2025.

8.44 Tourism NI Pensions

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Department and the Minister in respect of a DfE “letter of comfort” for Tourism NI NILGOSC employee pensions which is to be relaid.

8.45 Dilapidation Bill

The Committee considered a memo from the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in respect of the call for evidence for the Committee Stage of the Dilapidation Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to make a nil response to the call for evidence.

8.46 Cross-cutting Scrutiny

The Committee considered a memo from the Assembly Executive Review Committee in respect of the scrutiny of cross-cutting matters by committees.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond suggesting a change to the evidence-taking quorum for joint concurrent meetings.

8.47 Investment Showcase Event 2025

The Committee considered an invitation to the Chairperson to attend the upcoming Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council Investment Showcase Event 2025 on Wednesday 19 November 2025 in QEII Centre, London.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to attend, diary permitting.

8.48 Caleb’s Cause

The Committee considered a request from Caleb's Cause to brief the Committee on the way forward for post-19 SEN.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Caleb's Cause advising that the Committee is awaiting completion of the ETI review on SEN provision.

8.49 Insurance Costs

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Association of British Insurers regarding the Financial Conduct Authority General Insurance Retail findings.

8.50 Claim Management Companies

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of an article in the Insurance Times referring to referral fees charged by Claim Management Companies and their impact on car insurance costs.

8.51 Workplace Saving Schemes

The Committee considered correspondence from the Financial Conduct Authority on workplace savings schemes.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking how it is to promote the use of workplace savings schemes.

8.52 Ofcom ARA 2024-25

Noted: The Committee noted the Office of Communications (Ofcom) Annual Report and Accounts 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025.

8.53 Future Workplace Summit Conference

Noted: The Committee noted a Save the Date invitation from the NI Chamber of Commerce for the Future Workforce Summit conference on Thursday 9-2pm 16 October 2025.

8.54 Bryson Recycling

Noted: The Committee noted a request from Bryson Recycling to brief the Committee and that Bryson Recycling is to contact Members individually.

8.55 Shankill Women's Association

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Health advising of the Shankill Women's Association meeting space which could be used for committee meetings.

8.56 EIR Request

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from a concerned individual to/from DfE in respect of an Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) request on mineral prospecting licences.

8.57 NIE Wayleaves

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual in respect of issues relating to NIE Networks current wayleave practices and payments.

8.58 Fol Employment Tribunal

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual including a Fol request in respect of the Committee's actions following briefings on employment tribunal issues.

8.59 Employment Tribunal Complaint

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from a concerned individual to the Minister for the Economy in respect of the complaints mechanism against the Employment Tribunal President.

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed to revise the RHI stakeholder list to include the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association.

10. Any Other Business

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the energy efficiency capital grant scheme.

11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 17 September 2025 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Stormont.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to continue proceedings in closed session.

Proceedings continued in closed session at 11:26am.

12. Committee Strategic Plan

Agreed: The Committee agreed to give further consideration to taking evidence and producing reports on: skills; economic inactivity; regional balance; tourism and the impact of local events; careers guidance; the way forward for the High Street Taskforce and related support for businesses; energy and achieving climate change targets; and Higher Education funding and support for students.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 11:44am.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

17 September 2025