



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Committee for the Economy

### Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 18 February 2026**

**Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings**

**Present:**

Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Miss Jemma Dolan MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

**Apologies:**

Mr Gary Middleton MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Jonathan Buckley 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)

Aidan Stennett (Research Officer) – item 1 only

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed a revised agenda.

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

## **1. Renewable Heat Inspection Regime - Assembly Research Briefing**

Aidan Stennett joined the meeting at 10:03am.

The Committee noted the Assembly Research paper on a Renewable Heat Inspection Regime in the Republic of Ireland.

The Chairperson thanked Aidan for his briefing.

Aidan Stennett left the meeting at 10:08am.

Padraig Delargy joined the meeting at 10:08am

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it would not include the Assembly Research paper in its Committee Stage Report on the RHI (Closure of Non-Domestic Scheme) Bill.

Proceedings continued in public session at 10:16am.

## **2. Apologies**

Apologies were as indicated above.

## **3. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

## **4. Chairperson's Business**

### **4.1 Informal Meeting**

The Chairperson reminded Members of the Committee's external meeting at Impact Training, Lanark Way on 11 February 2026, which was followed by a tour of the facilities and an informal meeting with the leadership team.

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

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to send a letter of thanks to the leadership team at Impact Training.

#### **4.2 John D'Arcy OBE Retirement - Open University**

The Chairperson reminded Members that John D'Arcy OBE, director of the Open University will be retiring at the end of March 2026.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to Mr D'Arcy, thanking him for his service to the Open University and to wish him well for his retirement

### **5. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 11 February 2026.

### **6. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

### **7. RHI (Closure of Non-Domestic Scheme) Bill – clause by clause scrutiny**

Proceedings were reported by Hansard.

#### **Clause 1: Power to make regulations**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content with Clause 1, as drafted.

#### **Clause 2: Commencement and short title**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content with Clause 2, as drafted.

#### **Long title**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content with the Long Title of the Bill as drafted.

The Chairperson thanked the Committee for their careful and robust scrutiny of the RHI (Closure of Non-Domestic) Scheme Bill.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to Department urging it to publish the RHI closure audit, inspection and compliance arrangements and

relevant statistics, so as to enhance public confidence in the closure arrangements.

## 8. Skills Action Plan – Departmental oral evidence

The following officials joined the meeting at 10:21am:

- Graeme Wilkinson, Director of Skills in Industry Division, DfE;
- Clem Athanasiou, Director of Careers and Post-School SEN, DfE;
- Louise Watson, Director of Further Education Reform, DfE; and
- Graham Miller, Director of Higher Education, DfE

Key issues discussed included: the organisational structure of the Department; Level 2 and Level 3 participation; budget pressures and the delivery of the Skills Action Plan; the progress of the Higher Education Financial Needs Assessment and the Higher Education review; the reform of Further Education and a sustainable footprint for FE; tackling economic inactivity and links to Labour Market Partnerships and Local Economic Partnerships; childcare barriers for employers and the development of childcare professional pathways; the Longitudinal Education Outcomes report; use of Artificial Intelligence and the need for sharing data; apprenticeships including all-island options and insurance issues for employers and participants; skills academies delivery in rural areas; skills governance and the different jurisdictional approaches; the need for alignment with employers; sectoral needs including the hospitality and tourism sector; and the SEN Transformation bid.

Kate Nicholl declared an interest in respect of having children in childcare. Padraig Delargy and David Honeyford declared interests in respect of membership of the Public Accounts Committee.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence. The officials left the meeting at 11:30am.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted numerous organisational changes at the Department and agreed to write to the Department seeking an updated organisational chart.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the Learning Participation report.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on its plans to revise the governance of skills provision including, and in particular, the way forward for the Skills Council.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) report.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department expressing concerns in respect of the delay to the Higher Education review and seeking

clarification on the timeline for the review and current engagement with the Higher Education sector.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update as to: how policy is supporting childcare employers and professional development pathways; and how the Department is working with Further Education colleges and the childcare sectoral partnerships in this regard.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking a timeline for the development of all-island apprenticeships and information as to how the Department is addressing insurance issues for businesses offering apprenticeships.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on its work with Labour Market Partnerships in respect of tackling economic inactivity within Northern Ireland.

Proceedings were suspended at 11:30am.  
Proceedings resumed at 11:39am.

## **9. Sectoral Action Plans update – Departmental oral evidence**

The following officials joined the meeting at 11:39am:

- Carmel McConville, Deputy Director of Innovation and Priority Sectors, DfE;
- Linda Meldrum, Head of Agri Tech, DfE
- Damien Ryan, Head of Net Zero Business Opportunities and Advanced Manufacturing, DfE; and
- Holly McDonagh, Head of Life and Health Sciences, DfE

Key issues discussed included: staff vacancies and turnover within the Department; the need for alignment between action plans and the needs of industry; evaluation metrics; Enhanced Investment Zone progress; the UKG Industrial Strategy; the UKG Defence Growth Deal; software skills in schools; productivity; the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) proposition for software and cyber sectors; the delay in establishing an Agri-Foods Sustainability Body; and offshore renewable energy development.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.  
The officials left the meeting at 12:31pm

The Chairperson recorded his disappointment in respect of the quality of both Departmental evidence sessions and the absence of detail and inability to answer questions from the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on the Cyber and Software Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) proposition.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on the Agri-Foods Sustainability Body.

## **10. SL1 - Parental Bereavement Miscarriage Leave – written briefing**

The Committee considered the proposed statutory rule: The Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay (Miscarriage) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

The Committee considered responses to its call for views.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it is content for the Department to make the proposed rule.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to publish a summary of the responses on its delegated legislation webpage.

## **11. SL1 - Student Support Regulations**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the proposed rule: The Education (Student Support, etc.) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to issue a call for views on Citizen Space and publish the proposed rule and related papers on the Committee's delegated legislation webpage.

## **12. Correspondence**

### **12.1 Index**

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

### **12.2 BBC Charter Review**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Ministerial correspondence in respect of the BBC Charter Review.

### **12.3 NSMC Trade Ministerial Statement**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of the Ministerial oral statement in respect of the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Trade and Business Development Sectoral Format 28 January 2026.

### **12.4 NSMC Tourism Ministerial Statement**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of the Ministerial oral statement in respect of the North South Ministerial Council Tourism Sectoral meeting on 28 January 2026.

### **12.5 Fibrus Rollout**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Fibrus Project Gigabit roll-out.

### **12.6 Dual Market Access Stakeholder Forum**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Dual Market Access Stakeholder Forum and manufacturing investment data.

### **12.7 Cantor Fitzgerald**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a further Departmental response in respect of the Cantor Fitzgerald decision and the origin of trade data.

### **12.8 CAERA US trade tariffs**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of a Departmental response to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in respect of the impact on NI trade of recent US trade tariffs.

### **12.9 Housing Supply Strategy**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of cross cutting Departmental work on the Housing Supply Strategy.

### **12.10 CfJ Employment Tribunal Judgements**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of a Departmental response to the Committee for Justice in respect of the publication of judgments made by the Employment Tribunals.

### **12.11 Student Mobility**

The Committee considered correspondence from UCAS to the Minister, advising that UCAS has no control on the timing of examination results day and that universities are not obliged to use the UCAS tariff points system and some do not.

The Committee also considered correspondence from the Central Applications Office in respect of a common points system employed by the universities in the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Technological Universities Association (TUA).

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing from IUA and TUA in respect of their qualifications equivalencies project.

**Agreed:** The Committee further agreed to seek to schedule a briefing from the State Examination Commission in respect of the timing of results day.

### **12.12 CfF Arms Length Bodies**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance, providing further information on the review of Arms Length Bodies.

### **12.13 56<sup>th</sup> ESR Report**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the 56th Examiner of Statutory Rules report including The Energy Bill Relief Scheme and Energy Bills Discount Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 on which the ESR had no comment.

#### **12.14 Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of a further exchange between the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in respect of a dispute regarding the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism.

#### **12.15 Defence Related Products and Intra-EU Transfers**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of a further exchange between the Department for Business and Trade and the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee in respect of the treatment of defence related products and intra-EU transfers.

#### **12.16 CITB NI ARA**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of Construction Industry Training Board NI Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 August 2025.

#### **12.17 ABI Motor Insurance Tracker**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Association of British Insurers in respect of its UK-wide Motor Insurance Tracker for quarter 4 of 2025.

#### **12.18 QUB Exhibition – Balmoral Show**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an invitation to visit the Queen's University exhibition at the Balmoral Show 13-16 May 2026.

### **13. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to reschedule the briefing on the Higher Education Financial Needs Assessment.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing in respect of childcare provision from the NI Chamber of Commerce and childcare partners.

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

### **14. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

**15. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting**

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 25 February 2026 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Stormont.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 12:44pm.

**Phillip Brett MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**25 February 2026**