



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 24 June 2026

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings

Present: Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA
Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
Mr David Honeyford MLA
Mr Declan Kearney MLA
Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Present by video-conferencing:

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA
Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Apologies: Ms Diane Forsythe (Deputy Chairperson)

In Attendance: Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Michael Greig (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 10:02am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

Padraig Delargy declared an interest in respect of a family member being previously employed by Ulster University.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 NRC 2023-24 Accounts

The Chairperson advised Members that the 2023-24 annual report and accounts for Northern Regional College had been laid in the Assembly and that the accounts had been disclaimed by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG).

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed that, subject to the consideration of the Public Accounts Committee, it would seek to schedule a related evidence session from Northern Regional College.

3.2 Steel Nationalisation Bill

The Chairperson advised Members that the Steel Nationalisation Bill is progressing through Westminster and includes devolved provisions. The Committee noted that no memorandum has been laid in the Assembly even though a related memorandum has been laid in the Scottish Parliament in recent weeks.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and seek clarity as to whether the Department intends to lay a Legislative Consent Memorandum in respect of the Steel Nationalisation Bill.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 17 June 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Joint Concurrent meeting of the Committee for the Economy and the Committee for Education of 17 June 2026.

5. Matters Arising

5.1 EY Report

Padraig Delargy referred Members to a recent publication of an EY European Attractiveness Report noting the increase in Foreign Direct Investment within Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department noting the increase in Foreign Direct Investment and in order to advise Invest NI of the report and to seek its commentary at the upcoming evidence session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further information from EY on the impact of dual market access; the growth in the IT sector and what aspects of the Foreign Direct Investment increases were / weren't covered by the Windsor Framework.

6. Prospective Redundancies – UCU, UNISON and Unite

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 10:07am:

- Paddy Mackel, Regional Support Officer, University Colleges Union;
- Norman Hagan, Branch Chair at Ulster University, University Colleges Union;
- Aisling O'Beirn, Anti-casualisation Officer, University Colleges Union;
- Danielle McCusker, Regional Organiser, Unison; and
- Edward Carson Browne, Branch Chair Coleraine and Magee, Unite.

Key issues discussed included: the timing and expected outworking of the redundancy process; Employment Order compliance; exchanges between Ulster University and the unions; casualisation; low paid workers; the overall Higher Education vision and Higher Education funding model issues; speculative capital projects; other Ulster University costs; use of financial reserves; the multi-campus model; governance and transparency at UU; and management of the UU property portfolio.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.
The witnesses left the meeting at 12:01pm.

Proceedings were suspended at 12:01pm.
Proceedings resumed at 12:09pm.

7. Higher Education Budget - DfE and Ulster University

The following officials joined the meeting at 12:09pm:

- Professor Paul Bartholomew, Vice-Chancellor, Ulster University;
- Damian McAlister, Chief People Officer, Ulster University;
- Graham Miller, Acting Director, Higher Education Division, DfE;
- Linda McGuinness, Director, Magee Expansion Division, DfE; and
- Ciaran McGarrity, Director, Economic Infrastructure Division, DfE

Key issues discussed included: Ulster University's budget deficit and recovery plan; recruitment of students in excess of MaSN; savings associated with low wage reductions; the costs of an inflationary pay award; Ulster University stakeholder buy-in; Departmental staffing for the Higher Education funding model and the Magee expansion divisions; timescale for the Magee expansion and related infrastructure development; the HE Financial Needs Assessment, tuition fees, teaching grant increases and multi-campus model costs; RoI students; Employment Order compliance; the impact of immigration controls; and UK Government budget constraints.

Padraig Delargy left the meeting at 1:03pm

Declan Kearney left the meeting at 1:11pm

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 1:15pm

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 1:36pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity as to how the 6% contingency cuts have been applied to the Magee expansion project in such a way as to support teaching costs but reduce funding for enabling projects.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a further Departmental evidence session after summer recess on Higher Education funding and the impact on staffing, student places and the delivery of capital projects.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer consideration of issues relating to Higher Education funding etc. until its meeting of 1 July 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer consideration of the remainder of the agenda.

8. Any Other Business

8.1 Utility Regulator Bill

Agreed: The Committee agreed to publish the responses to the call for evidence for the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill, that have been received to date on the Committee webpage.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Utility Regulator seeking comment on the responses when it provides oral evidence in September.

8.2 Petroleum Exploration Bill

Agreed: The Committee agreed to publish the responses to the call for evidence for the Petroleum Exploration Licensing (Repeal) Bill, that have been received to date on the Committee webpage.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to seek clarity from the Department on the issues by respondents in respect of the Bill.

8.3 Regional Balance Bill

Agreed: The Committee agreed to launch its call for evidence for the Regional Balance Bill, including a memo to other statutory committees; a letter to stakeholders; a list of stakeholders; a Citizen Space survey; and a newspaper advertisement.

9. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next scheduled Economy Committee meeting will begin on Wednesday 1 July 2026 at 9:30am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 1:39pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

1 July 2026