



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 4 March 2026**

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

**Present:** Ms Diane Forsythe (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Mr Declan Kearney MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

**Present via video conferencing:**

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

**Apologies:** Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

**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 10:03am.

## **1. Apologies**

Apologies were as indicated above.

## **2. Declarations of Interest**

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

Diana Armstrong declared an interest in respect of being Chairperson for the All Party Group on Food to Go.

## **3. Chairperson's Business**

### **3.1 Committee Membership**

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed Declan Kearney MLA to the Committee for the Economy.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to Jemma Dolan MLA to thank her for her service to the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the former Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Gary Middleton MLA, to thank him for his service to the Committee.

## **4. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 25 February 2026.

## **5. Matters Arising**

The Committee referred to its forward work programme.

Kate Nicholl joined the meeting at 10:09am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the external meeting in Foyle be returned to the original date of 11 March 2026.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to reschedule a briefing from the Permanent Secretary in respect of the draft budget, to a Tuesday in March 2026.

## **6. Economic Impact of Business Rates – Hospitality Sector – oral evidence**

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 10:13am:

Present:

- Janice Gault, Chief Executive, NI Hotels Federation; and
- Michael Henderson, Chief Executive, NI Food To Go Association.

Present via video conferencing:

- Colin Neill, CEO, Hospitality Ulster; and
- Glyn Roberts, Chief Executive, Retail NI.

Padraig Delargy declared an interest in respect of previously working within the hospitality industry.

Key issues discussed included: reval 2026, the business rates methodology review, the treatment of refurbishment and other debts in the calculation of business turnover for rating purposes; the economic impact on the hospitality sector of business rates; the impact on hotel investment plans; the enduring food to go footprint in NI; RoI costs and the VAT differential; tax and structural divergence with RoI and EU comparators; High Street challenges, business closures; supporting new and existing businesses; the Good Jobs Bill and the impact on tips; the NI hospitality offer and people, promotion and price issues; vacancies, skills, immigration and new training avenues, apprenticeships; and regional balance.

Colin Neil left the meeting at 10:55am

Glyn Roberts left the meeting at 10:57am

The Deputy Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 11:44am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to undertake a joint evidence session with the Committee for Finance in respect of high street challenges and support for businesses.

## **7. Mid-Term Energy Strategy Review – DfE – oral and written evidence**

The following officials joined the meeting at 11:44am:

- Richard Rodgers, Head of Energy Group, DfE

- Anne-Maire McConn, Director of Energy Strategy and Corporate Services Directorate, DfE; and
- Stephen McGonagle, Project Lead, Energy Strategy and Corporate Services Directorate, DfE.

Key issues discussed included: recent energy price shocks, support for householders, oil regulation and price exploitation; the timeline to achieve Energy Strategy targets; Departmental resources and cross-departmental co-operation; the delivery of Energy Strategy Actions Plans (ESAPs); supporting offshore/onshore renewable development; other non-fossil fuel development including biomethane and hydrotreated vegetable oil; grid enhancement; dispatch down levels; energy pathfinder project in Derrylin; the unintended impact of energy subsidies in other jurisdictions; modelling energy costs for householders; green jobs/skills; and the trajectory to achieve the green economy target.

Sinead McLaughlin left the meeting at 12:23pm.

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 12:52pm.

Diana Armstrong left the meeting at 12:57pm.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 1:05pm.

- Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking:
- a flowchart of the Department's energy related plans and how they support an overall plan for delivering the Energy Strategy;
  - sight of the energy policy position statement;
  - sight of the dispatch down plan;
  - information on the pathway, milestones and timelines for achieving all of the Energy Strategy targets by 2030;
  - commentary on home heating oil regulation and measures which the Department is to adopt in order to limit price exploitation including support for oil buying clubs;
  - modelling information on the projected impact of a prolonged oil shock on household incomes; and
  - a link to the Department's new energy dashboard.

The Committee adopted a revised order to the items on its agenda.

## **8. Correspondence**

### **8.1 Index**

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

### **8.2 Draft Budget**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Ministerial correspondence in respect of the DfE draft budget, pending a Departmental briefing.

### **8.3 British-Irish Council**

**Noted:** The Committee noted notice of a Ministerial oral statement made on 2 March 2026, in respect of the British-Irish Council Energy meeting held on 12 February 2026.

#### **8.4 Social Economy Showcase Event**

The Committee considered an invitation from the Minister to attend a social economy showcase event in Parliament Buildings on 14 April 2026.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that Members would respond individually if they wished to attend.

#### **8.5 Mineral Prospecting Licensing**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Departmental correspondence providing notice of a call for evidence on mineral prospecting licensing.

#### **8.6 Invest NI – Good Jobs impact assessment**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from Invest NI declining to provide an impact assessment in respect of the Good Jobs Employment Bill.

#### **8.7 Budget Outturn and Forecast Outturn**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance in respect of 2025-26 budget outturn and forecast outturn.

#### **8.8 CfC Local Growth Fund**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Communities, providing an update on its scrutiny of the transition from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to the Local Growth Fund.

#### **8.9 CfTEO Windsor Framework issues**

The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for the Executive Office, seeking feedback on Windsor Framework issues.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content for the Clerk to respond.

#### **8.10 58th ESR report**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the 58th report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, which included two Statutory Rules considered by the Committee: S.R. 2026/17: The Disqualified Directors Compensation Orders (Fees) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 ; and S.R. 2026/9: The Chemicals (Health and Safety) and Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026, and about which the ESR had no comment.

#### **8.11 ISNI Investing Activity Report**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the Department's ISNI Investing Activity Report for February 2026.

#### **8.12 NIFC's Budget Assessment**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council's assessment report on the Finance Minister's proposed 2026-27 to 28-29/29-30 Budget.

### **8.13 Community Energy NI**

The Committee considered a request from Community Energy NI to brief the Committee on community energy projects.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing on the same day as the Department and Great British Energy.

### **8.14 Communities Against Mining**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from Communities Against Mining (CAM) to the Minister in respect of mineral prospecting licences.

## **9. SL1 - The Employment Rights (Increase of Limits)**

The Committee considered the Statutory Rule: The Employment Rights (Increase of Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 and related Departmental correspondence on parity with Great Britain on relevant payments.

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

## **10. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee deferred consideration of its forward work programme.

## **11. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

## **12. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting**

The next Economy Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Wednesday 11 March 2026 at 10:00am.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 1:09pm.

**Phillip Brett MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**11 March 2026**