



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 15 April 2026

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings

Present: Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Diane Forsythe (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Diana Armstrong MLA
Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA
Mr Declan Kearney MLA
Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA
Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Present via video conferencing:

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Apologies: Mr David Honeyford MLA

In Attendance: Peter McCallion (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

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Gary Middleton

The Chairperson and Members recorded their personal thanks to Gary Middleton.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Mr Middleton thanking him for his service to the Economy Committee and to the Foyle constituency and wishing him good health and success.

3.2 Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill

The Chairperson referred Members to a joint letter from a number of business organisations in respect of the anticipated content of the Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill.

Kate Nicholl joined the meeting at 10:04am

Declan Kearney joined the meeting at 10:06am

Members noted progress in respect of the development of the Bill but also recorded concerns at the delayed timeline and the importance of stakeholder engagement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department indicating its concerns, acknowledging progress and seeking a definitive timeline for the drafting and submission of the Bill to the Executive and sight of the recent policy paper.

3.3 Budget 2026-27

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Committee for Finance, providing relevant papers and referring to the absence of budget allocation decisions.

3.4 Irish News Article

The Chairperson referred Members to newspaper reports that the Minister had disregarded formal advice from officials and attended an event in Boston sponsored by former Sinn Fein Minister Máirtín Ó'Muilleoir, at a reported cost of around £47k.

Jonathan Buckley referred to the appointment of Mr Ó'Muilleoir to the board of Invest NI and suggested that the Minister's attendance at the event was unnecessary as Invest NI had indicated that it was well-represented at the event.

Padraig Delargy indicated that the Minister's attendance alongside the attendance of a RoI Minister was clearly part of an essential and ongoing Ministerial engagement programme to promote regional balance in respect of Foreign Direct Investment.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Invest NI seeking an oral evidence session in order to determine: the advice that was provided to the Minister and how often such advice has been disregarded; and details of the relevant communication between the Special Advisor to the Minister and Invest NI.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 25 March 2026, subject to the inclusion of a revision in respect of Mr Declan Kearney's remarks on the Cantor Fitzgerald issue.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Cantor Fitzgerald – written briefing

The Committee continued its consideration of the Cantor Fitzgerald papers.

Members exchanged views.

Diane Forsythe, Diana Armstrong and Jonathan Buckley referred to the significant level of redaction in the papers provided by the Department and the limited information provided in respect of the final meeting with Cantor Fitzgerald and the related discussion in respect of a substantial prospective Foreign Direct Investment.

Sinead McLaughlin and Kate Nicholl referred to the need to bottom out this issue and refrain from tedious speculation.

Padraig Delargy and Declan Kearney advised that the prospective jobs investment had never been secured and that there had been a mutual agreement in May 2025 between Invest NI and Cantor Fitzgerald to not proceed. They argued that information should be sought in writing from Invest NI and clarification obtained on the extent to

which the redacted information could be disclosed prior to the scheduling of any oral evidence session.

Declan Kearney left the meeting at 10:29am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Invest NI: seeking an oral evidence session on the Cantor Fitzgerald decision and the extent to which this has damaged or discouraged other prospective investment decisions; seeking clarity on what can or can't be divulged to the Committee; and to step through the Cantor Fitzgerald decision process clearly providing timelines so as to ensure transparency.

Declan Kearney rejoined the meeting at 10:34am.

7. Community Energy Northern Ireland - oral and written evidence

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 10:34am:

- John McMullan, Member, Community Energy NI;
- Anne Ford, Member, Community Energy NI;
- Tizianna O'Hara, Member, Community Energy NI; and
- Karen Arbuckle, Member, Community Energy NI

Key issues discussed included: community ownership and anti-poverty benefits of renewable energy and energy efficiency projects; mechanisms to support community benefit; examples in other jurisdictions; the need for policy and a route to market to empower community ownership; the absence of community energy project data for NI; the need for an awareness raising programme, technical skills and soft loans/grant aid; the challenges facing rural community development of renewable energy projects; and the role of the Renewable Electricity Price Guarantee Scheme in supporting smaller community projects.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.
The witnesses left the meeting at 11:24am.

Proceedings were suspended at 11:24am
Proceedings resumed at 11:31am

8. Great British Energy Northern Ireland Action Plans – DfE and GBE – joint oral and written evidence

The following officials joined the meeting at 11:31am:

- Helen Seagrave, Director of Local Energy, Great British Energy;
- Anne-Maire McConn, Head of Energy Strategy and Corporate Services, Department for the Economy;
- William Deane, Consumers Team Lead, Department for the Economy; and

- Barry Rooney, Energy Strategy Team Lead, Department for the Economy

Key issues discussed included: Energy Saving Trust benchmarking exercise and the development by DfE of a Community Energy Policy Framework by December 2026 in parallel with the GBE Local Power Fund delivery; the phases of the GBE programme including a community toolkit; the GBE scoring matrix and assessment process for community projects; the absence of a target for community energy development for NI; the need for an engagement and awareness raising programme with prospective community energy providers; the transitional fund investment in FE colleges; competitiveness of NI applicants to the GBE fund in the absence of a policy framework or network; Departmental resources to develop the policy framework; and the business case development for the £81m energy cost consequential and options for the surrender of the £30 per household allocation.

Padraig Delargy left the meeting at 12:42pm
The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.
The officials left the meeting at 12:54pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking:

- a breakdown of the benefits from the transitional fund investment in Further Education colleges in respect of cost and energy savings and jobs created;
- specific details of the Department's community energy engagement programme; and
- clarity on the Renewable Electricity Price Guaranteed Scheme and suggesting that consideration be given to the inclusion of smaller projects in order to support community energy developments.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Great British Energy (GBE) seeking:

- information on how the transitional fund was used in Scotland and Wales; and
- information on the scoring matrix and appraisal approach to be used for community energy projects so as to ensure smaller projects in NI are not disadvantaged owing to a lack of a Community Energy Policy Framework.

9. The Education (Student Support and Repayment) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

Noted: The Committee noted the proposed statutory rule: The Education (Student Support and Repayment) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

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

10. The Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (Employment and Earnings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee considered the statutory rule: SR 2026/74 The Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (Employment and Earnings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 2026 and agreed the following motion:

Agreed: “That the Committee for the Economy has considered SR 2026/74 The Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (Employment and Earnings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, recommends that it be confirmed by the Assembly.”

11. Correspondence

11.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

11.2 DfE Aviation Policy

Noted: The Committee noted the Departmental aviation policy public consultation document, pending a Departmental briefing on 29 April 2026.

11.3 DfE Heating Oil Regulation

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of heating oil regulation.

11.4 Childcare Employers

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of childcare employer engagement.

11.5 Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) Report

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) database which is described as a linked, de-identified database comprising post primary schools' data from the Department of Education and apprenticeships, further and higher education data held by the Department for the Economy.

11.6 Invest NI - New Operational Guidance

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of new operational guidance in respect of Invest NI and in order to eliminate the risk of public funds being used to support the manufacture of arms etc. that are used for genocide.

11.7 Late Payments

Noted: The Committee noted Departmental correspondence, providing information on the UK Common Framework for late payment.

11.8 SR2026/67: The Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (NI) 2026

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of SR2026/67: The Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026, previously affirmed by the Assembly.

11.9 Qualification Equivalences

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Education in respect of qualification equivalences with the Republic of Ireland and the impact of his proposed reforms to A-Levels on student mobility on the island of Ireland.

11.10 Timing of A Level Results Day

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Education in respect of the timing of results day and the role of JCQ.

11.11 State Examinations Commission (SEC) – timing of results day

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the RoI State Examinations Commission (SEC), in respect of the operation, delivery and development of the Republic of Ireland examinations including the Leaving Certificate and the timing of results day.

11.12 ISNI Activity Report

Noted: The Committee noted the ISNI DfE Investing Activity Report for March 2026

11.13 Budget

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance in respect of the 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn - February 2026 (R11).

11.14 Local Growth Fund

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance including a letter to the Minister of Finance in respect of the Local Growth Fund.

11.15 Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Framework

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for the Executive Office to the Department for the Economy, requesting a written update on the work it is undertaking under the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls framework.

11.16 Armed Forces Covenant

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for the Executive Office to the Department for the Economy, requesting information detailing the work it is undertaking in relation to the implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant.

11.17 Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill

The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Justice in respect of the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill call for evidence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to provide a nil response to the Committee for Justice.

11.18 General Teaching Council (NI) Bill

The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Education in respect of the General Teaching Council (NI) Bill call for evidence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to provide a nil response to the Committee for Education.

11.19 Youth Assembly

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Youth Assembly March update.

11.20 Comptroller and Auditor General FWP

The Committee considered an invitation from the Comptroller and Auditor General to the Chairperson to meet informally to discuss the Northern Ireland Audit Office forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was content for the Chairperson to meet informally with the Comptroller and Auditor General to discuss the programme and the wider work of the NIAO in further detail.

11.21 Autism Reviewer Event

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation from the Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland to the launch of her first Annual Report on Monday 27 April 2026.

11.22 Digital Omnibus for AI

Noted: The Committee noted further correspondence from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee on the Digital Omnibus for AI.

11.23 Toys Regulations

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Department for Business and Trade to the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee in respect of divergence between GB and Northern Ireland toy regulation, specifically relating to the use of cobalt in toys.

11.24 Windsor Framework

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Minister for the Cabinet Office in respect of the follow-up inquiry on Strengthening NI's Voice in the Context of the Windsor Framework.

11.25 Product Labelling Changes

Noted: The Committee noted further correspondence from Drilling and Pumping Supplies Ltd., providing links to information on product labelling changes scheduled in 2027.

11.26 DfE - Product Labelling Changes

The Committee considered a Departmental response, advising that changes to product labelling are industry-led and voluntary and that no government legislation or policy is involved.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Departmental response to Drilling and Pumping Supplies Ltd.

11.27 Supported Employment

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment in respect of its report exploring models of Supported Employment for people with disabilities: Lessons for NI.

11.28 Policy Eye NI – Grid Issues

Noted: The Committee noted the Policy Eye NI roundtable report on supporting the electricity grid and system in NI.

11.29 Chambré Weekly Bulletin

Noted: The Committee noted the Chambré weekly bulletin on political, policy and regulatory developments impacting Northern Ireland.

11.30 CMA Annual Plan 2026-27

Noted: The Committee noted the Competition and Markets Authority Annual Plan 2026-27.

11.31 FCA Annual Work Programme 2026/27

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) Annual Work Programme 2026/27.

11.32 Belfast Harbour Event

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation to the launch and presentation of the Belfast Harbour Masterplan 2025-50 on 19 May 2026.

11.33 NI Certification Office Annual Report 2024/25

Noted: The Committee noted the Northern Ireland Certification Office Annual Report 2024/25, covering trade union recognition in NI, including updated union membership numbers.

11.34 ICO complaint

Noted: The Committee noted further restricted correspondence from Budget Designer Homeworks, relating to an ICO complaint.

11.35 BH Estates Report: Farm2Export: Ammonia

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from BH Estates, announcing the release of its report: Farm2Export: Ammonia.

11.36 Concerned Individual

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual, providing commentary on governance, transparency, and structural gaps in Northern Ireland's energy and public accountability framework.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to receive a Departmental briefing on Credit Union Reform at its next meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to delay evidence sessions from Invest NI on international trade and the Chief Scientific and Technology Advisor on AI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Executive Office urging the publication of the public sector AI strategy.

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

13. Any Other Business

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department urging the development of a surrender mechanism for the £30 household allocation associated with the £81m energy cost scheme.

14. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next scheduled Economy Committee meeting will begin on Wednesday 22 April 2026 at 10:00am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 1:03pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

22 April 2026