



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 20 May 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 David Honeyford MLA
Mr Declan Kearney MLA

Present via video conferencing:

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Apologies: Ms Kate Nicholl 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 10:01am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

David Honeyford declared an interest as a Member of the Public Accounts Committee which has been considering AI-related matters.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Primary Legislation

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee held an informal evidence gathering session at the Balmoral Show on 13 May 2026 on the Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department in respect of the Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill, seeking:

- the Keeling Schedule for the Bill;
- the Equality Impact Assessment or screening document; and
- the Delegated Powers Memorandum.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department in respect of the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill, seeking:

- the Keeling Schedule for the Bill;
- the Equality Impact Assessment or screening document; and
- the Delegated Powers Memorandum.

3.2 Trade NI

The Chairperson advised Members that a delegation from Trade NI met with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Chairperson of the NI Affairs Select Committee last week to propose the use of targeted taxation levers to unlock growth in the Northern Ireland economy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to undertake a briefing from Trade NI on its Advancing Northern Ireland's Economic Future document.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to contact the Committee for Finance to suggest holding a joint meeting for the Trade NI briefing.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 6 May 2026.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Local Innovation Partnerships Fund

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 10:02am:

- Mark Lee, Head of Economic Policy Group, DfE;
- Professor Helen McCarthy, Chief Scientific and Technology Adviser;
- Dr Adrian Johnston, Innovation Commissioner for Belfast; and
- Professor Joann Rhodes, CEO of the Health Innovation Research Alliance NI (HIRANI).

Sinead McLaughlin joined the meeting at 10:03am.

Key issues discussed included: the current levels of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) support in Northern Ireland; Local Innovation Partnerships Fund (LIPF) projects and UKRI decision-making; the LIPF panel and good governance test-bed; support for clusters; promoting the LIPF projects and developing the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) proposition; the need for an over-arching strategy and linkage to City and Growth Deals etc.; measuring impacts; barriers to innovation; the design of a Research and Innovation Strategy; regional balance; the role of Invest NI supporting capacity development and the need for a research and innovation one-stop-shop for businesses; and support for Blue Zone projects.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.
The witnesses left the meeting at 11:17am.

Proceedings were suspended at 11:17am.
Proceedings resumed at 11:23am.

7. AI Strategy for Public Sector – CSTA

The following witness joined the meeting at 11:23am:

- Professor Helen McCarthy, Chief Scientific and Technology Adviser

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 11:25am.

Key issues discussed included: the key principles of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Public Sector Strategy – people focused, place-based and building on departmental science champions; lessons from other jurisdictions; use cases including: the project assessment cage, business case development/assessment, planning and records management AI tools; linkage to Integr8 and AI hubs; data issues and the need for legislation; employment exposure; AI skills development; accessibility issues; and the anticipated strategy consultation.

The Chairperson thanked the witness for her evidence.
The witness left the meeting at 12:10pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a further update on the development of the Local Innovation Partnerships Fund projects.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the briefing information on the Artificial Intelligence Public Sector Strategy with the Committee for Finance, which is currently undertaking an inquiry into the performance and culture of the NI Civil Service.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the anticipated development of a wider Artificial Intelligence economic strategy and the Artificial Intelligence skills surge programme.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to NICVA seeking its views on the use of Artificial Intelligence to deliver public services and how wider societal inclusion can be ensured.

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

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed the following motion:

“That the Committee for the Economy has considered: SR 87/2026 The Education (Student Support and Repayment) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026, and has no objection to the rule.”

9. Correspondence

9.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

9.2 Budget position

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Permanent Secretary, advising that in the absence of an agreed budget, contingency amounts have been issued to all departments.

9.3 DfE Staffing Vacancies

The Committee considered a Departmental response, reporting some reduction in staff vacancy levels.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on the levels of vacancy, the frequency of update for the vacancy figures, comparison with other departments; and the policy areas affected by the vacancies within the Department.

Pádraig Delargy noted that funding pressures are affecting the levels of Departmental vacancies.

9.4 Go Succeed

Noted: The Committee noted a Ministerial response, clarifying that £2.53m secured in 2026/27 for Go Succeed is from the Local Growth Fund.

9.5 CfF Vote on Account progress

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance, providing information showing the drawdown by departments using the Vote on Account facility.

9.6 Energy Policy

Noted: The Committee a Departmental response providing information on the development of energy policy in respect of storage and interconnection, which are to be published in 2026.

9.7 Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response clarifying that the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) Regulation has not been added to the scope of the Windsor Framework, thus CBAM does not apply to imports of electricity into NI, including electricity imported from Britain.

9.8 Renewable Electricity Target

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Renewable Electricity Target, restating the Department's position on the achievement of the 80% renewable electricity generation target by 2030.

9.9 Community Energy

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of Community Energy, setting out: the benefit of the Further Education investment; the engagement programme and indicating that the REPG will not include smaller (<5MW) generators.

9.10 Energy Efficiency Capital Grant scheme

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental holding response on the Energy Efficiency Capital Grant scheme.

9.11 Geothermal Energy

Noted: The Committee noted notification of the publication of a consultation on Geothermal Energy on 15 May 2026, which will run for 12 weeks.

9.12 Golden Bridges Event

Noted: The Committee noted an Invest NI response in respect of the Minister's attendance at the Golden Bridges event in Boston.

9.13 Cantor Fitzgerald Decision

Noted: The Committee noted an Invest NI response in respect of the Cantor Fitzgerald decision.

9.14 Fáilte Ireland branding

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the extension of Fáilte Ireland branding, advising that the All-Island Strategic Tourism Group will not provide oral evidence. The Committee also noted a possible informal event with the RoI joint Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment.

9.15 DfE Irish Language Policy

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Department's Irish Language Policy, which was launched 1 May 2026 for a 12 week consultation.

9.16 Barrier Busting Taskforce

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Barrier Busting Taskforce and mobile connectivity.

9.17 CoDA International Border Infrastructure

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response confirming that at City of Derry Airport international border infrastructure is already in place.

9.18 Consumer Council NI Partnership Agreement

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the signed partnership agreement between the Department for the Economy and Consumer Council NI.

9.19 ELC Sure Start

Noted: The Committee noted a Department of Education response confirming that Sure Start signposts families to relevant organisations for related Early Learning and Childcare financial advice.

9.20 Childcare Workforce

Noted: The Committee noted a response from the Education Minister advising that, subject to Executive agreement on the final ELC Strategy, further detail on the scope and an indicative timeline for delivery of a childcare workforce development plan will be provided in due course.

9.21 Health Minister GP declarations

The Committee considered a response from the Health Minister confirming that the Minister has asked the HSC Trusts to limit the requirement for GP health declarations to more senior childcare staff only.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department suggesting that it promotes the change to Further Education colleges, in order to support uptake of childcare courses.

9.22 Utility Regulator Bill - CRM

Noted: The Committee noted the Convention Rights Memorandum for the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill.

9.23 Utility Regulator Bill – Responses

Noted: The Committee noted nil responses to the call for evidence for the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill from the Committee for Justice and the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

9.24 Petroleum Bill - CRM

The Committee considered the Convention Rights Memorandum for the Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department in respect of the position for existing licences and the making of regulations.

9.25 Petroleum Bill – Response

Noted: The Committee noted a nil response to the call for evidence for the Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill from the Committee for Justice.

9.26 CAERA Maritime Fuel Supply

The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, asking what work, if any, the Economy Committee has completed, or has scheduled, in respect of maritime fuel supply and cost to the shipping industry.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Clerk to prepare a response.

9.27 DBT Cobalt in toys

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Department for Business and Trade to the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee in respect of the safety of toys, as regards cobalt.

9.28 QUB – Loss of student places

Noted: The Committee noted a response from Queen’s University Belfast on budget issues and potential loss of student places.

9.29 Youth Assembly monthly update

Noted: The Committee noted the Youth Assembly monthly update for April 2026.

9.30 Transmission Investment Invitation

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation from Transmission Investment to the Committee to visit an Interconnector Converter Station site on 18 May 2026.

9.31 Children in Northern Ireland Report

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation from Children in Northern Ireland to the launch of its research report 'Left Out: Disabled Children's Rights and Experiences in Northern Ireland' on Thursday 4 June 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed Members would respond individually if they are to attend.

9.32 CBI/Ibec

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of a letter from CBI and Ibec to the Chancellor and Tánaiste regarding the Government's commitment to progressing a bilateral approach to labour mobility issues and cross-border working on the island of Ireland.

9.33 Concerned Individual – governance issues

Noted: The Committee noted a written briefing from a concerned individual highlighting gaps between the requirement for energy efficient homes and a retrofit strategy and supply chain issues.

9.34 Concerned Individual - Employment Tribunals

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual in respect of employment tribunals.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the focus of its joint concurrent meeting with the Committee for Education in respect of the Skills Strategy and TransformED NI. The Committee agreed that this would include island of Ireland student mobility careers information.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek the stakeholder list from Sinead McLaughlin MLA in respect of her anticipated Private Member's Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the progress of the Renewable Electricity Price Guarantee Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule:

- a strategic planning session;
- a briefing from Aontas on widening participation adult learning;
- a Departmental briefing in respect of the feedback to the tourism inspection/categorisation consultation;
- a Ministerial briefing in respect of the budget and legislative programme; and

- a briefing from Invest NI in respect of the Minister's attendance at the Golden Bridges event and regarding the Cantor Fitzgerald decision.

11. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

12. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next scheduled Economy Committee meeting will begin on Wednesday 27 May 2026 at 10:00am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 12:28pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

27 May 2026