



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 25 March 2026

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings

Present: Ms Diane Forsythe (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Mr Declan Kearney MLA

Apologies: Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

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

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Renewable Generation Target

The Chairperson reminded Members that one of the Energy Strategy targets includes increasing renewable electricity generation to 80% of demand. The Committee had yet to receive an explanation as to how this was to be achieved.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department, SONI and the Utility Regulator seeking clarity as to whether the dispatch down measures (including the commissioning of the synchronous compensators and grid reinforcements) and the new renewable generation connections are in effect the route map for achieving the 80% renewable generation target by 2030. The Committee further agreed to seek clarity as to whether the Renewable Electricity Price Guarantee Scheme and the Offshore Renewable Action Plan are designed to address anticipated growth in electricity demand in the 2030s owing to expected increasing use of EVs and heat pumps etc..

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 16 March 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 18 March 2026.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Enhanced Investment Zone (EIZ) –oral and written evidence

The following officials joined the meeting at 10:04am:

- Ciaran McGarrity, Director of Economic Infrastructure Group, DfE;
- Adrian Grimshaw, Strategic Advisor, SIB;
- Raymond Kelly, Deputy Director, Skills in Industry Division, DfE; and
- Brendan McGuigan, Director of Advanced Manufacturing, Invest NI.

Key issues discussed included: Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government approval for the EIZ projects; EIZ programme governance; biotech and photonic clusters; a potential Ryan Air project; alignment with other economic development programmes; economic impact; economic inactivity and assured skills academy measures and targeting objective need; addressing barriers to growth, productivity and providing necessary economic infrastructure; and the advanced manufacturing pilot with the Makers Alliance and the Further Education colleges to support SMEs.

Padraig Delargy declared an interest in respect of representing the Foyle constituency.

The Chairperson welcomed the Enhanced Investment Zones and thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 10:58am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of the economic impact assessment for the Enhanced Investment Zone and an update on the outworking of the advanced manufacturing pilot.

7. Petroleum Licensing Bill – Departmental oral and written evidence

The following officials joined the meeting at 10:59am:

- Jimmy Graham, Director, Business Decarbonisation, Gas, Minerals and Renewable Electricity, DfE;
- Mark Wilson, Head of Minerals and Petroleum Branch, DfE; and
- John McManus, Minerals and Petroleum Branch, DfE.

This session was recorded by Hansard.

Key issues discussed included: Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill; existing licenses and legal risk; impact on geothermal development; alignment with planning policy; and establishing the commercial viability of oil and gas deposits in NI and comparison with other similar jurisdictions.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 11:14am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking information on geographic areas resembling NI and the related number of exploration licenses reasonably required to establish commercial extraction viability for oil and gas.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to save the date: 24 June 2026 for an informal evidence taking event on the Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill and the Utility Regulator (Preparation for Decarbonisation) Bill.

8. The Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations

The Committee considered the statutory rule: SR 2026/56 The Education (Student Support, etc.) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and agreed the following motion:

Agreed: “That the Committee for the Economy has considered the statutory rule: SR 2026/56 The Education (Student Support, etc.) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, has no objection to the rule.”

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Departmental seeking clarity on the additional cost for Disability Support Allowance associated with the change in eligibility.

9. The Employment Rights (Increase of Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

Noted: The Committee noted the laid statutory rule: SR 2026/57 The Employment Rights (Increase of Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026.

10. The Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (General) (Amendment) Regulations 2026

The Committee considered the statutory rule: SR 2026/58 The Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (General) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and agreed the following motion:

Agreed: “That the Committee for the Economy has considered SR 2026/58 The Statutory Parental Bereavement Pay (General) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, recommends that it be confirmed by the Assembly.”

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Departmental in respect of the waiving of the usual delegated legislation procedure for this rule.

11. Correspondence

11.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

11.2 Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill

Noted: The Committee noted Ministerial correspondence, in respect of the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill.

11.3 Belfast Works Connect

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of the Belfast Works Connect request for £1.7m funding for economic inactivity programmes.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Departmental response to Belfast Works Connect.

11.4 Fermanagh Chamber of Commerce

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of the proposed establishment of a Fermanagh Chamber of Commerce.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Departmental response to the Fermanagh Business Group.

11.5 DfE Staffing

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence providing a copy of the current Departmental organisational structure and referring to a vacancy level of around 25%.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity in respect of its staffing structure, skills vacancies, planned efficiencies and plans to critically review staffing so as to identify vacancies that could be suppressed and those which must be filled in order to fulfil policy objectives.

11.6 DfE US Reciprocal Tariffs

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental response, providing a breakdown of the impact of reciprocal tariffs applied by the United States.

11.7 DfE US Reciprocal Tariffs - CAERA

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Department for the Economy to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in respect of reciprocal tariffs by USA.

11.8 HoL NICS - US Reciprocal Tariffs

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in respect of US tariffs and the Windsor Framework.

11.9 Cantor Fitzgerald Papers

The Committee considered a Departmental response, further to the Committee's request for sight of the Cantor Fitzgerald papers.

Members exchanged views.

Jonathan Buckley: noted that the papers indicated that the Cantor Fitzgerald investment was well advanced; sought details for the geopolitical issues that were discussed at the meeting of 11 March 2025; and commented on the level of redaction and the apparent selective leaking of related information.

Declan Kearney: noted the letter of offer withdrawal document which referred to a mutual agreement between Cantor Fitzgerald and Invest NI; noted the change in role of the Cantor Fitzgerald CEO on 18 February, one day before the Invest NI letter of offer was issued; and the potential implications of the America First policy for investments of this kind. He suggested clarity be sought on Invest NI's mutual agreement with Cantor Fitzgerald to discontinue with the investment under discussion.

Pádraig Delargy: noted that there was only ever the prospect of job investment and that Cantor Fitzgerald had made no such investment since that time outside of the USA; indicated that unhelpful and ill-informed commentary would undermine future foreign direct investment of this kind; referred to an accompanying inaccurate narrative and the need to respect commercial sensitivity of this and other potential investors; and also contended that some of these issues were outside of the scope of the Committee.

Diana Armstrong: noted the importance of USA investment in Northern Ireland and disputed the linkage of the Cantor Fitzgerald decision to the America First policy.

David Honeyford: contended that the above matters were within the scope of the Committee and noted the need for leadership and transparency.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the Cantor Fitzgerald papers and related matters at its next scheduled meeting.

11.10 Fáilte Ireland - Extension of Branding

The Committee considered a response from Fáilte Ireland in respect of the extension of its branding.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek to schedule a briefing from the All Island Strategic Tourism Group regarding the extension of Fáilte Ireland branding.

11.11 Tourism Ireland – Social Media Marketing

The Committee considered a response from Tourism Ireland, including information on its budget for the last 5 years and on social media marketing costs and campaigns.

11.12 Tourism NI - Social Media Marketing

The Committee considered a response from Tourism NI, providing budget information for the last 5 years and information on social media marketing costs and campaigns.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Tourism NI and Tourism Ireland seeking clarity as to how spending on social media influencers complies with procurement rules; seeking clarity on the Terms of References for the social media influencers who receive payments etc.; and whether a code of practice is followed.

11.13 Tourism NI - Destination Stewardship Plans

Noted: The Committee noted a response from Tourism NI in respect of Destination Stewardship plans; the Mourne Gateway Project; the Carlingford Ferry; the Discover NI website; and the Visit Derry review.

Jonathan Buckley left the meeting at 12.09pm.

11.14 Tourism NI - International Tourism Events Fund

Noted: The Committee noted a response from Tourism NI, in respect of the International Tourism Events Fund.

11.15 Tourism NI - Skills Action Plan

Noted: The Committee noted a response from Tourism NI, referring to the Skills Action Plan for the tourism sector and a Tourism and Hospitality Skills Group which has been established to coordinate this work and support sustainable growth across NI.

11.16 HoL NISC - CBAM

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in respect of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM).

11.17 HoL NISC - Car Registration Issues

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in respect of car registration issues and seeking the relevant legislative timeline.

11.18 HoL NISC - Safety of Toys

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

11.19 UK Internal Market 2025-26 Report

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Office for the UK Internal Market 2025-26 report.

The Chairperson recorded her concern in respect of the reported reduced number of GB SMEs engaging in trade with NI.

11.20 CMA Review into Home Heating Oil Supply

The Committee considered a notice of a Competition and Markets Authority review into home heating oil supply.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Competition and Markets Authority welcoming the review, noting the related issues in identifying domestic oil customers and suggesting that this be addressed by the review.

11.21 Product Labelling

The Committee considered correspondence from Drilling and Pumping Supplies Ltd, relating to changes to all product labelling from 1d to 2d barcodes from 2027.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity and further information on the changes to product labelling.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Drilling and Pumping Supplies Ltd seeking clarity on the information and support provided to businesses in this regard.

11.22 Complaint to the Information Commissioner

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of a complaint to the Information Commissioner.

11.23 Invitation from Transmission Investment Ltd

Noted: The Committee noted an invitation from Transmission Investment Ltd to an event on 15 April 2026.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a revised forward work programme including:

- a Departmental briefing in respect of budget decisions;
- RaiSe and Bill Office briefings for expected legislation;
- attendance at an informal event at the Balmoral Show on 13 May 2026 in place of the usual Committee meeting; and
- an informal evidence taking event on 24 June 2026 in Parliament Buildings.

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

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to seek a further joint event with the Committee for Education in respect of skills issues etc..

13. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

14. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next scheduled Economy Committee meeting will begin on Wednesday 15 April 2026 at 10:00am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 12:20pm.

Phillip Brett MLA

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

22 April 2026