



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 29 April 2026**

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

**Present:**

Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

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:**

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

**Apologies:**

Ms Diana Armstrong MLA

Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA

**In Attendance:**

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Katie McMaster (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Sarah Dowd (Clerical Officer)

Aidan Stennett (Research Officer) – item 8 only

Clare Maguire (Deputy Head of Public Engagement) – item 13 only

Caroline Moore (Participation and Outreach Manager) – item 13 only

Diane Forsythe assumed the Chairperson's role and the meeting commenced in open session at 10:06am.

## **1. Apologies**

Apologies were as indicated above.

## **2. Declarations of Interest**

Kate Nicholl declared an interest in respect of her children receiving childcare and her receipt of associated support from the Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme (NICSS).

Diane Forsythe declared an interest in respect of her role as Assembly Parliamentary Secretary for the Minister of Education during the development of the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.

Declan Kearney joined the meeting at 10:07am.

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

### **3.1 Informal Meeting – US Consul**

The Chairperson advised that Members of the Committee had met informally with representatives from the US Consul and the Federal Bureau of Investigation on 22 April 2026.

**Noted:** The Committee noted a previously circulated summary note of the informal meeting.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to send a letter of thanks to the US Consul General for the informative session.

### **3.2 Informal Meeting – Canadian High Commission**

The Chairperson advised that Members of the Committee had met informally with representatives from the Canadian High Commission on 23 April 2026.

**Noted:** The Committee noted a previously circulated summary note of the informal meeting.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to send a letter of thanks to the Canadian High Commission for the informative session.

#### **4. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 22 April 2026.

#### **5. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

#### **6. NI Chamber of Commerce, FSB NI and Childcare Providers – childcare issues**

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 10:09am:

- Stuart Anderson, Director of Public Affairs and International Relations, NI Chamber of Commerce and Industry;
- Nikolai Koplewsky, Director of Operations, Sleepy Hollow Group;
- Diane Koplewsky, CEO, Sleepy Hollow Group; and
- Lorna Muldoon, Policy Advisor, FSB NI.

Phillip Brett joined the meeting at 10:13am and assumed the role of Chairperson.

Key issues discussed included: the economic importance of childcare in addressing gender disadvantage in the economy; costs and childcare fee capping; pre-employment requirements including medical fitness/suitability appraisal provided by GPs; the need for a childcare advisory board; the need for support for smaller childcare providers and parents to navigate the complex benefits and financial landscape; the need for cross-departmental collaboration and support; the development of HMRC-compliant workplace nurseries; the role of district councils; the use of voluntary organisation and other premises; the skills pipeline and relationship with Further Education; the Early Learning and Childcare Workforce development plan; the need for a childcare Workforce Development Agency; the use of data to inform policy decisions; supply side measures including energy, business rates and Employers' National Insurance; and the anticipated impact of the Employment Rights Bill.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 11:31am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Health seeking clarity in respect of the need for medical fitness/suitability appraisals as

part of pre-employment vetting in the childcare sector; and the timescale for the review of related minimum standards.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to write to the Minister for Education: seeking details of the Early Learning and Childcare Workforce development plan; encouraging the Minister to undertake a Small and Micro Business Impact (or SAMBIT) assessment for the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy; and seeking further information as to how the new Strategy will engage district councils in order to address variations in childcare provision across Northern Ireland.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to write to Sure Start setting out the concerns raised by childcare providers and seeking clarity as to how the support childcare providers and parents need is to be addressed in the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy and provided by Sure Start in order to help parents and providers navigate a complex benefits and tax environment.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to write to the Department for the Economy calling for: support to be provided to smaller childcare providers in order to help them navigate a complex employment environment; provision of workplace nursery HMRC-compliant toolkits including sample forms and easy to follow guidance; and a plan to support the early roll-out of childcare skills academies with the support of the FE colleges in order to address variations in childcare provision across Northern Ireland.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to write to the Minister for the Economy: seeking details of the different sectoral impact assessments that the Department has undertaken in respect of the anticipated Employment Rights Bill; and encouraging the Minister to engage with all business sectors prior to introduction of the Bill.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the NI Chamber of Commerce and Industry seeking further information on its research into the need for a childcare workforce development agency.

## **7. Draft Aviation Strategy - Department for the Economy – oral and written evidence**

The following officials joined the meeting at 11:37am:

- Ciaran McGarrity, Head of Economic Infrastructure, DfE;
- Ian Maxwell, Air Connectivity Branch, DfE; and
- Stuart Maxwell, Air Connectivity Branch.

Key issues discussed included: the need for an aviation route development policy; the impact of the Electronic Travel Authorization and other visa restrictions on tourism in Northern Ireland; the benefit of restoring duty free sales to local airports;

the need for the further devolution of Air Passenger Duty; support for and the sustainability of City of Derry Airport; the need to improve business connectivity; route viability, competition between airlines and airports in NI and RoI; Departmental resources to develop an Aviation Strategy; and regional balance considerations.

The Chairperson thanked officials for their briefing.

The officials left the meeting at 12:31pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department in respect of the need for border infrastructure at CoDA as it develops more international routes and seeking feedback to the consultation, when available.

## **8. Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill – Assembly Research**

Aidan Stennett joined the meeting at 12:32pm.

The Committee noted the Assembly Research paper on the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill: Key Considerations.

The Chairperson thanked Aidan for his briefing.

Aidan left the meeting at 12:40pm.

## **9. Correspondence**

### **9.1 Index**

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

### **9.2 RHI Closure Data**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response indicating that draft RHI regulations will likely require the Department to publish information on closure accredited installations.

### **9.3 Draft Budget**

The Committee considered a Departmental response on the draft budget and information on cost to benefit ratios in relation to partner organisations.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department encouraging the Department to quantify its current position in respect of office efficiency in order to better plan for and evaluate anticipated efficiencies. The Committee also agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on Peace Plus projects.

### **9.4 Energy Cost Savings**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the £81m energy cost saving scheme.

### **9.5 Renewable Electricity Target**

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of the renewable electricity target and dispatch down.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department again to request clarity on how the renewable electricity target of 80% will be met.

### **9.6 GB Warm Homes Scheme**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the Barnett consequential for the NI Executive, associated with GB Warm Homes Scheme.

### **9.7 Tourism Northern Ireland - Social Media**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Tourism Northern Ireland's response on social media and the code of practice for influencers.

### **9.8 Budget Outturn**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a memo from the Committee for Finance in respect of the 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn - March (R12) Position.

### **9.9 Youth Assembly**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the Youth Assembly expressing interest in engaging with the Committee's legislative scrutiny.

### **9.10 Examiner of Statutory Rules**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of the 63rd report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, including S.R. 2026/56: The Education (Student Support) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

### **9.11 DCSDC: Community Energy**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to share responses with Derry City and Strabane District Council in respect of the community energy session with CENI, GBE and the Department.

### **9.12 LiRIC Interconnector Project**

The Committee considered a request from Transmission Investment Limited to present to the Committee on the LiRIC interconnector project.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing from Transmission Investment Limited on the LiRIC interconnector project.

### **9.13 OCN: Skills Report**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of Open College Network Northern Ireland's research report entitled "A higher skills ambition for Northern Ireland: A revised skills outlook for Northern Ireland for 2035".

### **9.14 Independent Autism Reviewer**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of the annual report of the Independent Autism Reviewer.

### **9.15 Pharos**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from the founder of Pharos, a data intelligence platform built on Northern Ireland's public datasets.

## **10. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek to undertake an additional meeting on Tuesday 19 May 2026 to receive evidence from UCU, Unite and UNISON; the Department and University of Ulster in respect of potential job losses.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to not undertake a joint concurrent meeting with the Committee for Education on 13 May 2026 on the Early Years and Childcare Strategy owing to conflicting commitments.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to hold a joint concurrent meeting with the Committee for Education on 10 June 2026 in respect of the Skills Strategy and TransformEd.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to give further consideration to a joint concurrent meeting with the Committee for Education on matters relating to qualifications and skills equivalencies between NI and Rol.

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

### **10.1 The Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill – Committee Stage Extension**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to put down the following motion for plenary debate:  
*“That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 30 October 2026, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill”.*

### **10.2 Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill – Committee Stage Extension**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to put down the following motion for plenary debate:  
*“That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 20 November 2026, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill”.*

## **11. Any Other Business**

### **11.1 Ministerial evidence session**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek a briefing from the Minister before summer recess in respect of her policy, legislative programme and budget for the remainder of the mandate.

### **11.2 QUB Student Places**

The Chairperson referred Members to recent media coverage in respect of funding for core teaching and research at Queen's University Belfast (QUB); and the associated risk of losing 2700 student places.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to QUB seeking further information on the funding issues and the prospective loss of student places.

### **11.3 Smart Metering**

The Deputy Chairperson referred Members to the Minister's announcement in respect of the Smart Electricity Meters Design Plan and the previous evidence session with the Utility Regulator.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on the timeline for introduction of smart meters and how the estimated £800m cost of the roll-out has been profiled within the Department's budget.

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

The next scheduled Economy Committee meeting will begin on Wednesday 6 May 2026 at 10:00am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to continue proceedings in closed session.

Proceedings continued in closed session at 12:55pm.

## **13. Committee Stages- Call for Evidence Events – Assembly Engagement**

Clare Maguire and Caroline Moore joined the meeting at 12:55pm.

The Committee noted the Assembly Engagement paper on the proposed Committee Stage events.

The Chairperson thanked the Clare and Caroline for their briefing.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 12:59pm

**Phillip Brett MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**6 May 2026**