



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for the Economy

## Minutes of Proceedings

**Wednesday 23 September 2026**

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

**Present:** Ms Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA  
Mr David Honeyford MLA  
Mr Peter Martin MLA  
Mr Mike Nesbitt MLA

**Present by video-conferencing:**

Mr Declan Kearney MLA  
Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

**Apologies:** Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)  
Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

**In Attendance:** Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Michael Greig (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 10:11am.

## **1. Apologies**

Apologies were as indicated above.

## **2. Declarations of Interest**

Mike Nesbitt declared an interest in respect of his wife being employed as a lecturer by Belfast Metropolitan College.

Peter Martin declared an interest in respect of previously being employed as a lecturer by Belfast Metropolitan College.

Padraig Delargy declared an interest in respect of being a previous participant in the Skill Up programme at North West Regional College.

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

### **3.1 DfE Spending Review Submission**

The Chairperson advised Members that the Department had shared its spending review update submission to the Department of Finance, which covers resource and capital for 2026-27 and the remainder of the spending review period.

**Noted:** The Committee noted the Departmental submission, pending the Departmental budget briefing on 20 October 2026.

## **4. Draft Minutes**

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

## **5. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

## **6. Further Education Northern Ireland – course offers and budget pressures**

Mike Nesbitt left the meeting at 10:13am

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

- Professor Malachy O'Neill, Governing Body Chair, North West Regional College;
- Damian Duffy, Principal and Chief Executive, Belfast Metropolitan College; and
- Tommy Martin, Principal and Chief Executive, South Eastern Regional College

Declan Kearney joined the meeting at 10:14am

Key issues discussed included: the cancellation and/or pausing of Further Education (FE) enrolments on courses across NI; offers withdrawn amounting to perhaps approximately 10% of enrolment losses; apprenticeship reduction of perhaps approximately 10%; the loss of leisure and craft courses; pay pressures; limited cash reserves; savings associated with IT estate improvement delays; the impact of Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs) on cost bases; the impact of the loss of the European Social Fund on skills provision; apprenticeship levy reform; FE redundancy concerns; the FE Fit for the Future project; FE duplication with community providers; tertiary education options; NEETs provision; impact of 6<sup>th</sup> form funding in schools; and the Entitlement Framework refresh.

The Committee recorded its support for the Further Education sector in Northern Ireland and the important work it does to support economic inclusion.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 11:35am.

Mike Nesbitt rejoined the meeting at 11:35am

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to Further Education NI seeking:

- further information on the loss of enrolments: by subject and geographical area, in respect of offers withdrawn, in regards to apprenticeships/skills and other qualifications losses, and information on the associated community and rural impact;
- information on the skills budget allocations to Further Education institutions; and
- an update on the relevant FE transformation projects.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department for Education noting the recent agreement by the Assembly of a motion to reform 6<sup>th</sup> form funding and provision and seeking an update on the Department for Education's plans to refresh the Entitlement Framework and revise the 6<sup>th</sup> form funding model.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to revise the order of its agenda.

## **7. Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill - informal clause by clause scrutiny**

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

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

Proceedings were recorded by the Official Report.

The Committee informally deliberated on likely amendments to the Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill.

### **Clause 1: Principal Set of Repeals**

The Committee noted submissions and Departmental assurances in respect of the removal of the licensing framework, fracking, the vesting of petroleum resources and the Department retaining the right to take action against those conducting relevant onshore activities around petroleum exploration and extraction.

**Agreed:** The Committee informally agreed it was content for Clause 1 to stand part of the Bill.

### **Clause 2: Transitional Provision**

The Committee noted submissions and Departmental assurances in respect of the withdrawal of live licenses and the payment of refunds etc.

**Agreed:** The Committee informally agreed it was content for Clause 2 to stand part of the Bill.

### **Clause 3: Consequential Provision**

**Agreed:** The Committee informally agreed it was content for Clause 3 to stand part of the Bill.

### **Clause 4: Ancillary Regulations**

The Committee noted submissions and Departmental assurances in respect of the making of regulations.

**Agreed:** The Committee informally agreed it was content for Clause 4 to stand part of the Bill.

### **Clause 5: Commencement**

**Agreed:** The Committee informally agreed it was content for Clause 5 to stand part of the Bill.

### **Clause 6: Short Title**

**Agreed:** The Committee informally agreed it was content for Clause 6 to stand part of the Bill.

The Committee noted submissions and Departmental assurances in respect of A1P1 rights relating to license refunds, the role of the UK Government in potentially overturning any petroleum licensing arrangements; and that offshore petroleum development was a reserved matter.

**Agreed:** The Committee informally agreed it would take no further action on these matters.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.  
The officials left the meeting at 11:53am.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to hear from the Assembly Examiner of Statutory Rules and to set out its formal position on the Bill on 30 September 2026.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to write to the Department in respect of the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill, indicating that it was considering amendments relating to the provision of advice to all Departments and revising the role of the Utility Regulator to include home heating oil regulation; and seeking the Department's views on such amendments.

## **8. Centre for Competitiveness**

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 11:54am:

- Dr Paul Madden, Chief Executive, Centre for Competitiveness;
- Dr Bob Barbour, retired Chief Executive, Centre for Competitiveness; and
- Marianne Cushley, Head of Marketing and Operations, Centre for Competitiveness

Declan Kearney left the meeting at 11:56am

Key issues discussed included: productivity issues including Trade Union impact and examples of international best practice; good jobs and vocational and technical career paths; comparative competitive advantages for Northern Ireland; and engagement with the Department.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.  
The witnesses left the meeting at 12:59pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Centre for Competitiveness seeking:

- international best practice information on the impact of trade union representation on productivity;
- information on successful productivity policies in similar jurisdictions; and
- information on international government policy on Artificial Intelligence in order to exploit productivity gains.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity as to how it is to work with the Centre for Competitiveness in order to help invest NI broaden its client base so as to include smaller companies.

## **9. Gas Safety (Installation and Use) (Amendment) Regulations - feedback on call for views**

The Committee considered the proposed statutory rule: The Gas Safety (Installation and Use) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2026 and responses received to the related call for views.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department for Communities in respect of changes to housing and tenancy legislation in order to support the proposed statutory rule.

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

## **10. Employer's Liability (Compulsory Insurance) (Amendment) Regulations**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the proposed statutory rule: the Employer's Liability (Compulsory Insurance) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 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.

## **11. End of Session Report - September 2025 to August 2026**

The Committee considered a draft of its end of session report.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the draft report should be published as the Committee's seventh report of the mandate.

## **12. Correspondence**

### **12.1 Index**

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

### **12.2 Household Electricity Discount Scheme**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an urgent written Ministerial statement in respect of the Household Electricity Discount Scheme.

### **12.3 Review of apprenticeships**

**Noted:** The Committee noted Departmental correspondence in respect of the 2-stage review covering ApprenticeshipsNI and Higher-Level Apprenticeships.

### **12.4 ARAs for ALBs**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response, providing timelines for annual reports and accounts for ALBs etc..

### **12.5 Capital Spend Budget Adjustments**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of capital spend budget adjustments, clarifying that the difference was due to a delay in City and Growth Deal spending by district councils.

### **12.6 Invest NI 2025-26 ARA Response**

**Noted:** The Committee noted an Invest NI response, providing information on Invest NI 2025-26 annual report and accounts and the BSDL and MRDE Directors' Statements.

### **12.7 Tourism Inspection and Categorisation**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a memo from the Committee for Infrastructure, enclosing correspondence from the Infrastructure Minister advising that there has been no engagement with DfE on tourism inspection and categorisation.

### **12.8 Adverse Childhood Experiences in NI Report**

The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for the Executive Office on the QUB and UU report: The Prevalence and Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in Northern Ireland.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence and report to the Department for comment.

### **12.9 CfI - Renewable Electricity Generation Bill**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a nil response from the Committee for Infrastructure in respect of the Renewable Electricity Generation Bill.,

### **12.10 CfJ - Renewable Electricity Generation Bill**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a nil response from the Committee for Justice in respect of the Renewable Electricity Generation Bill.

### **12.11 CfTEO - Renewable Electricity Generation Bill**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a nil response from the Committee for The Executive Office in respect of the Renewable Electricity Generation Bill.

### **12.12 CE - Renewable Electricity Generation Bill**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a nil response from the Committee for Education in respect of the Renewable Electricity Generation Bill.

### **12.13 AERC - Westminster Statutory Instruments**

**Noted:** The Committee noted a copy of research briefing in relation to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's ongoing review into the development of a formal process and guidance on handling of Westminster Statutory Instruments.

#### **12.14 73rd ESR Report**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the 73rd Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, including the Education (Student Support) (Amendment No.2) Regs and Industrial Training Levy (Construction Industry) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 on which the ESR had no comment.

#### **12.15 ISNI Report – August 2026**

**Noted:** The Committee noted the ISNI Investing Activity Report for August.

#### **12.16 Wastewater Constraints and the Cost of Delay**

The Committee considered a request to brief from the Wastewater Infrastructure Group in respect of its recent report: Wastewater Constraints and the Cost of Delay in NI.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule a formal evidence session.

#### **12.17 “Good Jobs” and Contracts of Employment**

**Noted:** The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual in respect of suggested reforms to employment law.

#### **12.18 Heat Pump Grant**

The Committee considered correspondence from a concerned individual in respect of heat pump grants in NI.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department for comment.

#### **12.19 Industrial Tribunals**

The Committee considered correspondence from a concerned individual, suggesting a rule change to employment tribunals.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department and the President of the Tribunal and ask whether there is merit in the rule changes proposed.

### **13. Draft Forward Work Programme**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to hold an additional meeting on 24 November 2026 to receive a briefing from the Minister on policy, budget and legislation.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to hold two additional meetings on 16 December 2026 and 6 January 2027, to facilitate further scrutiny of legislation.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to write to all relevant Departments in respect of the Regional Balance Bill and the issues raised by statutory committees in response to the call for evidence.

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

**14. Any other business**

There was no other business.

**15. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting**

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

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 1:12pm.

**Phillip Brett MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for the Economy**

**30 September 2026**