Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Tuesday 20 October 2026

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present:	Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)
	Ms Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
	Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
	Mr Declan Kearney MLA
	Mr Peter Martin MLA
	Mr Mike Nesbitt MLA
	Ms Kate Nicholl MLA
Apologies:	Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA
	Mr David Honeyford MLA
In Attendance:	Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
	Katie McMaster (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
	Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

The meeting commenced in open session at 9:31am without a decision-making quorum.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's business.

4. 2026-27 Spending and Budget Contingency update – Department for the Economy - oral and written evidence

The following officials joined the meeting at 9:32am:

- Ian Snowden, Permanent Secretary, DfE:
- Johanna Park, Finance Director, Budgeting and Business Partnering, DfE

Padraig Delargy joined the meeting at 9:38am.
The Committee had a decision-making quorum.
Kate Nicholl joined the meeting at 9:40am.
Peter Martin joined the meeting at 9:42am.

Key issues discussed included: Resource DEL, capital spending and the use of Version 2 of the draft budget as the guide for expenditure; the absence of a Higher Education letter of offer and the Teaching Grant potential shortfall in 2027 and consequent QUB/UU pressures; all-island student mobility and the need for reciprocal HE student places practices; the development of a NI version of the British Industrial Competitiveness Scheme; the proposed aircraft Maintenance Repair and Operation bid; skills and apprenticeships student places and the impact of the loss of the European Social Fund and the removal of existing employee eligibility for apprenticeships; reform of Further Education and Higher Education; the economic impact of the Belfast Fleadh; the Employment Rights Bill; the application of energy VAT reduction; accountability, efficiency and DfE disclaimed accounts; cross-departmental working, efficiency, data sharing, digital transformation and the use of Artificial Intelligence; Annual Managed Expenditure support for biomethane and the related consultation.

Peter Martin recorded his support for all island student mobility.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.
Officials left the meeting at 10:44am

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

- further information on the quantum of the potential Teaching Grant shortfall for January to February 2027;
- a summary of measures taken over the last 5 years by the Department to drive efficiency, improve delivery and manage the budget;
- Departmental commentary and estimate of the pressures on the DfE budget and the level of duplicate funding as a consequence of the increasing number of school age students that are pursuing vocational educational pathways outside of school;
- clarification on the previously reported 2000 paused apprenticeship starts;
- further information on the economic impact of the Belfast Fleadh or the timescale for producing the final figures;
- sight of minutes of all meetings between senior officials in NI/RoI and between NI/RoI Ministers in respect of all island student mobility, and the need for reciprocity on related funding; and
- clarity on the British Industrial Competitiveness Scheme and the likely number of NI firms eligible and the level of support that they might secure and the anticipated threshold for participation.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Public Accounts Committee seeking its commentary and estimate of the pressures on the DfE budget and the level of duplicate funding as a consequence of the increasing number of school age students that are pursuing vocational educational pathways outside of school.

5. Any other business

There was no other business.

6. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next scheduled Economy Committee meeting will begin on Wednesday 21 October 2026 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 10:49am.

Ms Diane Forsythe MLA

(Deputy Chairperson), Committee for the Economy

4 November 2026