Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for the Economy

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 21 October 2026

Meeting Location: Room 30

Present: Ms Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr David Honeyford MLA

Mr Declan Kearney MLA

Mr Peter Martin MLA

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin MLA

Mr Mike Nesbitt MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Present via video conferencing:

Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA

Apologies: Mr Phillip Brett MLA (Chairperson)

In Attendance: Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

Michael Greig (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Katie McMaster (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Karen O'Hare (Clerical Supervisor)

Aoibheann Baker, Bill Clerk – item 6 only

Ross Connolly, Assembly Research Officer – item 8 only

Nathan Mulholland, Assembly Research Officer – item 8 only

Stephanie Mallon, Bill Clerk – Items 9 and 15 only

The meeting commenced in public session at 10:04am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Declarations of Interest

Padraig Delargy, Sinead McLaughlin and Kate Nicholl all declared an interest in respect of being members of a credit union.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Congratulations

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Phillip Brett MLA offering congratulations on the birth of his daughter.

3.2 Hospitality Ulster Event – 4 November

The Chairperson advised Members that Hospitality Ulster had invited the Committee to attend an informal meeting with Sacha Lord following the Committee meeting on Wednesday 4 November 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to accept the invitation to the informal meeting.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 14 October 2026.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed the revised minutes of the Economy Committee meeting of 7 October 2026.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

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

Proceedings continued in closed session from 10:06am.

6. Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill – Bill Office Advice

Aoibheann Baker joined the meeting at 10:07am.

Declan Kearney joined the meeting at 10:09am.

Bill Office provided advice in respect of possible amendments to the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill.

Noted: The Committee noted the paper provided by the Bill Office.

Noted: The Committee also noted responses from the Department and the Utility Regulator in respect of the provision of decarbonisation advice to other departments and other matters.

The Chairperson thanked Aoibheann for her advice.
Aoibheann Baker left the meeting at 10:19am.

Proceedings continued in open session from 10:19am.

7. Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill – formal clause by clause

The following officials joined the meeting at 10:20am:

- Kellie Sprott, Director, Energy Strategy and Corporate Services, DfE; and
- Paul Skillen, Energy Bill Team, DfE.

Proceedings were recorded by the Official Report.

The Committee formally deliberated on amendments to the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill.

Clause 1: power to provide advice, information or assistance to support the Department

The Committee divided on the amendments set out below:

Amendment 1: Clause 1, page 1, line 3

Leave out ‘Department’ and insert ‘Northern Ireland departments’

Amendment 2: Clause 1, page 1, line 4

Leave out from "Department" to "considers" in line 5 and insert "Northern Ireland departments are required, or consider"

Amendment 3: Clause 1, page 1, line 7

Leave out 'Department' and insert 'Northern Ireland departments'

Amendment 4: Clause 1, page 1,

Leave out line 11 and insert –

"departments" has the meaning given by the Departments (Northern Ireland) Order 1999'

Amendment 5: Long title

Leave out " Department for the Economy" and insert "Northern Ireland departments"

Ayes: Diane Forsythe, Peter Martin, Mike Nesbitt; David Honeyford; Kate Nicholl; Sinead McLaughlin

Noes: Declan Kearney; Padraig Delargy

The motion was passed

Agreed: The Committee agreed Clause 1 as amended.

Clause 2. **Commencement**

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was content with Clause 2, as drafted.

Long Title

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was content with the Long Title, as amended.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.
Officials left the meeting at 10:25am

8. Regional Balance Bill - Assembly Research

Ross Connolly and Nathan Mulholland joined the meeting at 10:26am.

Noted: The Committee noted the papers provided by the Assembly Research team.

Key issues discussed included: different economic theories; potential conflicts with existing strategies; data issues and granularity; cross-border economic influences; regional development strategies; equity, equality and targeting need.

The Chairperson thanked Ross and Nathan for their advice.
Ross Connolly and Nathan Mulholland left the meeting at 11:16am.

Proceedings continued in closed session from 11:16am.

9. Regional Balance Bill – Bill Office Briefing

Stephanie Mallon joined the meeting at 11:16am.

Bill Office provided advice in respect of the Committee Stage of the Regional Balance Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to suspend the briefing and to alter the order of its agenda items.

Stephanie Mallon left the meeting at 11:23am.

Proceedings continued in public session at 11:23am.

10. Credit Unions (Amendment) Bill Pre-2nd Stage brief - Department for the Economy

The following officials joined the meeting at 11:24am:

- Colin Jack – Director, Business and Employment Regulation Division, DfE;
- Laurence Rogers – Head of Better Business Branch, DfE; and
- Chris Denvir - Credit Union Policy Lead, DfE.

Proceedings were recorded by the Official Report.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.
Officials left the meeting at 11:34am

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it would likely support the passage of the Credit Unions (Amendment) Bill at Second Stage.

11. Credit Unions (Amendment) Bill – Call for Evidence

Agreed: The Committee agreed to launch its call for evidence for the Credit Unions (Amendment) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed a list of stakeholders and agreed to issue: a related a memo to other statutory committees; a letter to stakeholders; a Citizen Space survey; a newspaper advertisement and a press release.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking the Delegated Powers Memorandum, Keeling Schedule and Equality Impact Assessments for the Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to refer the Bill to the Examiner of Statutory Rules for her consideration.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Youth Assembly seeking its views on the age of memberships provisions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek to schedule an informal lunchtime event with representative Credit Union bodies during the Committee Stage.

12. Renewable Electricity Generation Bill CRM – written briefing

The Committee considered a memorandum from Assembly Legal Services on the engagement of the Renewable Electricity Generation Bill with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and Article 2(1) of the Windsor Framework.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking its commentary on the memorandum.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to respond to Save The Moat indicating that although the Call for Evidence has closed, the Committee would be flexible in respect of late submissions and indicating where all relevant papers will be published.

13. SR 2026/178 The Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Amendment) Regulations

The Committee considered the statutory rule: SR 2026/178 The Gas Safety (Installation and Use) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the following motion:

"That the Committee for the Economy has considered: SR 2026/178 The Gas Safety (Installation and Use) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2026 and subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, has no objection to the rule."

14. Correspondence

14.1 Index

Noted: The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

14.2 Energy Savings Opportunity Scheme

The Committee considered Departmental correspondence regarding a Westminster Statutory Instrument changing the Energy Savings Opportunity Scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department, seeking clarity and a further explanation on what the actual changes are to be under the Statutory Instrument.

14.3 Renewable Electricity Price Guarantee Scheme

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental Notice of Intention in respect of the Renewable Electricity Price Guarantee (REPG) scheme.

14.4 Biomethane Consultation

The Committee considered a written Departmental briefing on its biomethane consultation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a Departmental briefing on the outcome of the consultation.

14.5 Local Growth Fund

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of NICVA's Local Growth Fund Cuts impact report

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Departmental response to NICVA.

14.6 Adverse Childhood Experiences

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of the report on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Departmental response to the Committee for the Executive Office.

14.7 Centre for Competitiveness

The Committee considered a Departmental response in respect of the Centre for Competitiveness.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Departmental response to the Centre for Competitiveness for its information.

14.8 Local Innovation Partnerships Fund

Noted: The Committee noted a Departmental update in respect of Local Innovation Partnerships Fund.

14.9 Entitlement Framework etc.

Noted: The Committee noted a Department for Education response on the Entitlement Framework and the funding of post-16 education.

14.10 Further Education NI

The Committee considered a response from Further Education NI providing further information on FE enrolment reductions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department, seeking an update on FE related transformation projects.

14.11 DE - Regional Balance Bill

Noted: The Committee noted a Department for Education response in respect of the Regional Balance Bill.

14.12 DoH - Regional Balance Bill

Noted: The Committee noted a Department of Health response in respect of the Regional Balance Bill.

14.13 DoF - Hospitality Rates Review

Noted: The Committee noted a Department of Finance response in respect of the hospitality rates review.

14.14 North South Interconnector Update

Noted: The Committee noted a response from Minister O'Brien, RoI Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment in respect of progress of North South Interconnector, which is targeted to reach final energisation in Oct 2031.

14.15 CfF - Budget Briefings

The Committee considered a memo from the Committee for Finance, requesting information on any oral budget briefings in last 4-6 weeks**.**

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond in respect of the recent Departmental evidence session on 20 October 2026.

14.16 CfF - Departmental 5 Year Plans

Noted: The Committee noted a memo from the Committee for Finance, regarding Departmental 5 Year Plans.

14.17 Safety of Toys - Cobalt

Noted: The Committee noted House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee correspondence to the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade in respect of the safety of toys, as regards cobalt, referring to a short period or regulatory divergence affecting NI in this regard.

14.18 Digital Options for Energy and Tyre Labelling

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, in respect of simplification and better use of digital options for energy and tyre labelling and the potential impact for businesses selling into NI.

14.19 DfE Equality Unit Complaint

Noted: The Committee noted a Disability Discrimination Act complaint to the Department central complaints manager in respect of the DfE Equality Unit.

14.20 British Insurers Brokers Association

The Committee considered correspondence from the British Insurers Brokers Association requesting an informal meeting with the Chairperson in respect of challenges in the Northern Ireland insurance market.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Chairperson would attend the meeting, diary permitting.

Proceedings continued in closed session from 11:49am.

15. Regional Balance Bill – Bill Office Briefing

Stephanie Mallon joined the meeting at 11:49am.

Bill Office provided advice in respect of the Committee Stage of the Regional Balance Bill.

Stephanie Mallon left the meeting at 11:58am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further advice on the meaning of 'due regard' and whether obligations on departments automatically refer to Arms' Length Bodies and Non-Departmental Public Bodies.

Proceedings continued in public session at 12:00noon.

16. Waste Water Infrastructure Group - Oral and written evidence

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 12:00noon:

- John Davison, Director, Head of Strategic Communication, Turley;
- Mark Spence, Chief Executive, Construction Employers Federation;
- Stuart Anderson, Director of Public Affairs and International Relations, NI Chamber; and
- Justin Cartwright, National Director, Chartered Institute of Housing

Key issues discussed included: the economic impact of wastewater constraints; revenue raising measures to fund infrastructure shortfalls; the impact on the wider economy of housing restrictions, apprenticeships and brain drain issues; the impact

on the delivery of the Housing Strategy; the need for planning reform; the need for urgent cross-departmental action; and the need for support from the UK Government and Republic of Ireland Government

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy, Department for Infrastructure, Department for Finance, Department for Communities and Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, highlighting the crisis in wastewater infrastructure, recommending a working group be established and seeking evidence of cross-Departmental co-operation to address the above.

17. Draft Forward Work Programme

Agreed: The Committee agreed its forward work programme as drafted.

18. Any other business

18.1 Ryanair MRO

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister in respect of the Maintenance Repair and Operations Centre bid seeking clarity on why the City of Derry Airport was not included in this stage of the bid and whether the local specialist skills profile was taken into account in making this decision.

19. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next scheduled Economy Committee meeting will begin on Wednesday 4 November 2026 at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Committee meeting was adjourned at 1:03pm.

Diane Forsythe MLA

Deputy Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

4 November 2026